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THE WOLDGATE CURSUS
Humber-side

David McOmish & Cathy Tuck

SURVEY REPORT

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION SERIES

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION REPORT SERIES
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ENGLISH HERITAGE

**THE WOLDGATE CURSUS
HUMBERSIDE**

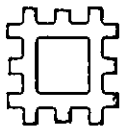
NMR Nos: TA 06 NE 15 & 19

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY

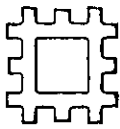
During the winter of 2001, English Heritage investigated the southern limit of the Woldgate Cursus near Rudston in Humberside, one of at least five cursus enclosures closely grouped together in an area of 25 sq.km., the densest concentration of such monuments in the British Isles. The Woldgate Cursus perhaps better known as the Rudston 'A' Cursus, lies within an intensively farmed valley that bisects the northernmost block of chalk upland in England, the Yorkshire Wolds (Fig 1). It extends to the north from a terminal just lying south of the village of Rudston in the County of Humberside and the parish of the same name for a distance of nearly 2.7km. Its course, as currently mapped, is incomplete with a large gap 300m in length apparent where the enclosure crosses the line of the Gypsy Race Valley. Apart from one major kink in its alignment as it descends a steep-sided dry valley, it follows a straight northerly course passing to the east of the village before terminating on higher ground to the north.

Very little of the monument now survives as an earthwork and as a result survey focussed on the only identifiable component of the Cursus complex, namely, the southern terminal, centred at TA 099 657. The analytical field survey was undertaken as part of the first phase of work associated with the *Cursus Enclosures and Bank Barrows: Britain and Beyond* project (CEBAB). The aim of this is to 'better the understanding of the nature of the specific monument type' (Exploring Our Past, 1998, 35), in particular cursus enclosures, but also bank barrows which present an obviously shared morphology. The project is aimed at providing an academic overview of these allied monument classes and addresses a variety of related issues including monument condition, vulnerability, management and protection. Ultimately, the project will support the work of the Monuments Protection Programme by providing data which will help to define and refine constraint areas for scheduling and future management.

The principal monument under review here is the southern terminal of the Woldgate Cursus, but survey also recorded the remains of a now very heavily plough-damaged round barrow adjacent to and on the west side of the Cursus. Both are protected as Scheduled Ancient Monuments and are listed in the National Monuments Record as follows: The Woldgate Cursus TA 06 NE 19 and round barrow TA 06 NE 15.



Figure 1:
Location map showing
the extent of the
Yorkshire Wolds. The
Rudston Complex lies
close to the northern
limit of this block of
chalk in the Great
Wold Valley.



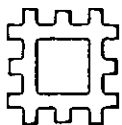
2. GEOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY AND LAND USE

The Yorkshire Wolds are the northernmost outcropping of a large band of chalk that sweeps in a wide arc from the Dorset coastline in the south, outcropping through the remainder of Wessex then feeding through the Chilterns to East Anglia and the interruption caused by The Wash. To the north-west beyond this, the chalk again outcrops firstly on the Lincolnshire Wolds and then finally in the Yorkshire Wolds. The Wolds cover an area of close to 1400 sq. km. and extend from the River Humber in the south to Flamborough Head in the north. It is an upland area which stands out prominently from the surrounding lowlands flanking the River Humber, the Vale of York and the Vale of Pickering and reaches a maximum height of 243m at Wilton Beacon on the north-western periphery of the massif; elsewhere the slopes are contained between 50m and 200m. The band of chalk here extends in a straight line northwards from the Humber Estuary for a distance of 40km before it makes a sharp angled turn to the east and the North Sea coast. The chalk plateau presents itself as plane tilting from west to east with the western flanks, particularly the north-western extremes, being the more pronounced, here the escarpment edges, notably in the area of Wilton Beacon, are especially pronounced. To the east of the escarpment edge the topography is that of a typical chalk landscape of gently rolling profile with spurs and plateaux occasionally intercut with now dry valleys. This is very much the pattern seen in the area around the Woldgate Cursus, with the Cursus lying on gently undulating ground tilting to the north-east which is bisected by the Gypsy Race Valley.

The plateau is dissected by a series of dry valleys known locally as 'slacks' or 'dales' and these have been created by alluvial down-cutting deriving from the most recent glacial activity. The western escarpment edge is noticeably indented by these meltwater channels which have been exacerbated/enlarged by the erosion of streams at various times throughout the post-glacial period.

The underlying solid geology is dominated by Middle and Lower Chalk with only rare outcrops Red Chalk in a few places. The Lower Chalk can be found on the lower slopes of the escarpment edge. There is almost no drift geology on the Wolds but smaller deposits of chalk gravel and chalky till do survive in the valley bottoms. There is also much valley alluvium present in the area of the Woldgate Cursus and substantial deposits of colluvially derived material mask its course in the vicinity of Rudston as it traverses the valley floor.

In general, the soils are typical of those seen on other chalk downland habitats in that they have a shallow profile, are light and drain freely. These calcareous soils of the Andover



and Panholes associations are deeper around the edge of the Wolds and are here frequently accompanied by clay and sandy soils. It is an arid environment with the majority of the watercourses lying peripherally to the main chalk eminence. On the west many of the streams originating from the escarpment face flow west and feed into the catchment for the River Derwent system and ultimately the Humber. On the east the major watercourse, the River Hull, is fed by streams emanating from the Wolds. The most pronounced of these however, is the Gypsy Race. This river is the only permanently flowing river in this part of the Yorkshire Wolds and flows in a sinuous but roughly west to east course across the chalk downs, issuing into the North Sea at Bridlington. The river penetrates deeply into the chalk massif, almost linking through to the Vale of Pickering on the west. The monuments at Rudston are all intimately associated with this waterway and the accompanying valley, the Great Wold Valley, is one of the most extensive inundations to the chalk plateau, facilitating easy access to the heartland of the northern Wolds and, indeed, further to the west to the lower-lying Vales.

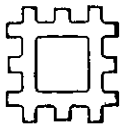
The water table has fluctuated greatly over the millennia but research deriving from the recent work at Hasholme and Heselton suggests that much of the lower-lying area to the west of the Wolds were covered in fen reed and swamp during the Neolithic (Millett & McGrail 1987). At this time many of the major monumental complexes, including that at Rudston, were developing and it is plausible that, as a result, the dry chalk uplands offered a more suitable living environment (Manby 1970). This work implies perhaps that the water table at this time was considerably higher than at present and that a number of the dry valleys, including one which runs close to the Cursus terminal, may have held running water. In addition, a number of other springs and waterholes may also have played important roles in attracting settlement and related activities.

The early land use and environmental history of the Wolds is, again, largely typical of that witnessed at other chalkland locales throughout southern England. There is, however, insufficient evidence to construct a meaningful history of land use in the environs of the Woldgate Cursus. The evidence from other, local sites, points to an early phase of woodland clearance sometime during the 4th millennium BC. Soil samples taken from the pre-barrow surface below the Kilham point to a lengthy period of intervention in which the heavy woodland canopy was cleared and a cycle of cultivation, abandonment and woodland regeneration established by the time the barrow mound was built. Thereafter, the landscape was 'opened' up and the cycles of use and disuse became increasingly infrequent throughout the Later Neolithic and Bronze Age. Certainly, by the Late Bronze Age – Early Iron Age transition the landscape was very much cleared and open with arable farming well established, setting a pattern of use on the Wolds that is mirrored by today's economic activities.



Currently, the full extent of the Woldgate Cursus lies within an intensively farmed environment and the line of the monument is under a crop of wheat for much of the year. As a result the Cursus terminal is very poorly preserved as is the nearby round barrow. However, the earliest phases of destructive ploughing across the Cursus may have occurred in antiquity. Immediately to the south of Rudston village, the line of the Cursus is overlain by a complex of Late Iron Age or Romano-British enclosures whose alignment does not seem to have been influenced by the Neolithic monument. This implies that, by this time, the Cursus may have been a negligible feature in the landscape. In contrast, to the north of the village the line of the Cursus surveyed for a longer period of time and was incorporated within a linear earthwork of later prehistoric or Romano-British date.

For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Woldgate Cursus lay within long-lived pasture as much of the downs were given over to sheepwalks. And indeed, the fields at the southern end of the Cursus are referred to as such on the Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 6-inch map of 1850.



3. PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

The earliest documented investigations on both the Woldgate Cursus and adjacent round barrow are those by Canon William Greenwell. In his book, *'British Barrows: a record of the examination of sepulchral mounds in various parts of Britain'* (1877), he discusses fieldwork at the Woldgate Cursus terminal as well as the nearby round barrow – part of a wider investigation of similar burial mounds on the Yorkshire Wolds. At the time of this fieldwork the terminal clearly survived as a pronounced earthwork as did the smaller round barrow mounds, but Greenwell was evidently unaware of the significance of the monument, perhaps because it had been severely damaged by earlier ploughing.

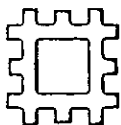
'...two long mounds, almost parallel, their northern ends gradually losing themselves in the surface level, but connected together at their southern ends by another long mound.'

(Greenwell 1877, 233)

Thus the main components of the southern Cursus terminal were classified as three separate mounds one of which, was 'taken away fifty years since' in order to infill a chalk pit. At this time, human bones were noted by the workmen who were then ordered to cease their work.

His excavations across the 'principal mound' – the terminal earthwork – noted that each end of the mound was raised and that the western platform was composed entirely of soil and so differed from other sections which were formed of chalk and soil. This led him to suggest that this western end had been further artificially enhanced so that it now appears as a round barrow. On excavation, an adult inhumation was found at a depth of 2ft. (0.6m) below the surface and this was accompanied by a Beaker. In close association with this but apparently earlier, was a child inhumation with a flint knife. A great quantity of charcoal lay about the bodies and below the adult inhumation Greenwell found a beam of wood (possibly a coffin) close to a shallow pit some 7ft (2.1m) in length, possibly a grave cut. In this there were the remains of at least one articulated and a disarticulated skeleton associated with another Beaker vessel.

In the middle of the mound Greenwell uncovered further disarticulated burials of both adults and children concluding that these had been moved from an original grave and redeposited here. Further excavations were undertaken on a prominent second mound that extended from the western terminal of that described above. Although physically connected, Greenwell assumed that this was a completely separate element; at this time the mound stood to a height of over 4ft (1.2m). He found no burial within it, instead,



uncovering scattered fragments of pottery (including Towthorpe Ware of late 4th millennium BC date), flint tools and flakes as well as numerous bones of ox and pig.

Greenwell assumed *a priori* that the long mounds, as he describes the Cursus, were burial structures:

'It seems difficult to account for these extensive and peculiarly arranged mounds upon any other supposition than that they were intended for sepulchral purposes...'

(*ibid.*, 256)

But after his excavations he was less certain that this was their original intended function. Noting that all of the burial evidence accrued from his work derived from secondary or later contexts he drew an analogy between these long mounds and the structures of long barrows, some of which are embellished with later round mounds. Ultimately, however, he could offer no convincing interpretation and left it to the reader to:

'...form his own conclusion as to the object of this collection of material, which must have required the continued labour of a large number of people over a considerable period of time.'

(*ibid.*, 257)

The adjacent round barrow was excavated by Greenwell in 1864 at which time he recorded the dimensions as being 4½ft (1.4m) high and 66ft (20m) in diameter. He found a central grave pit cutting through a turf mound and into the underlying chalk. It contained two cists, one with three inhumations and a Beaker, the other with a cremation and Beaker. Between the cists and the side of the grave was a further cremation with Beaker. These extensive discoveries were augmented by four more burials associated with late Beaker ceramics and a 'bed' (?coffin) of charcoal. Beyond the area of the grave pit and above the old ground surface, two inhumations were found, one with a Food Vessel.

The 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1850 is the earliest recorded illustration of the Woldgate Cursus southern terminal (Fig 2). At the time of depiction much of the downs were set aside for pasture and, indeed, the field containing the terminal is referred to as *The Sheepwalk*. By way of contrast, a heavily arable landscape lay to the south of the terminal (marked by Wold Gate Road) and it was presumably the extension of this throughout the 19th century that has, ultimately, led to the current degraded state of the earthworks here. The field pattern to the north of Wold Gate Road, in the area of the Cursus, also points to the presence of strip fields of an earlier date, perhaps remnants of the medieval open field system. The road leading from Wold Gate to the village of



Rudston and which slices through the line of the Cursus, is named Burton Agnes Balk – a reminder of an earlier agricultural land use.

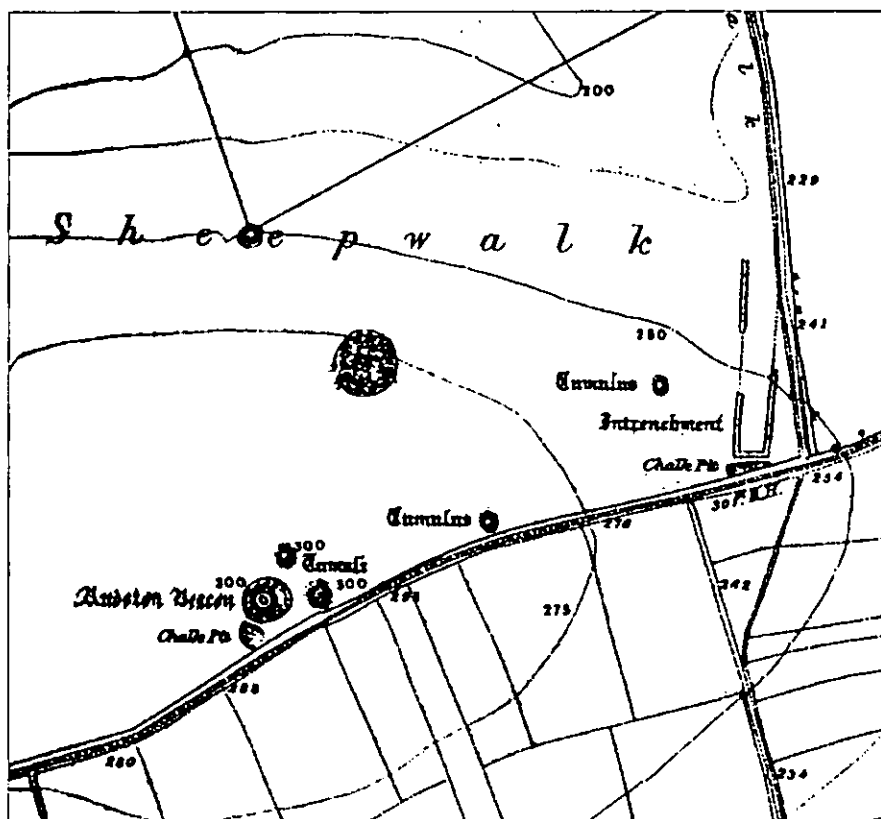


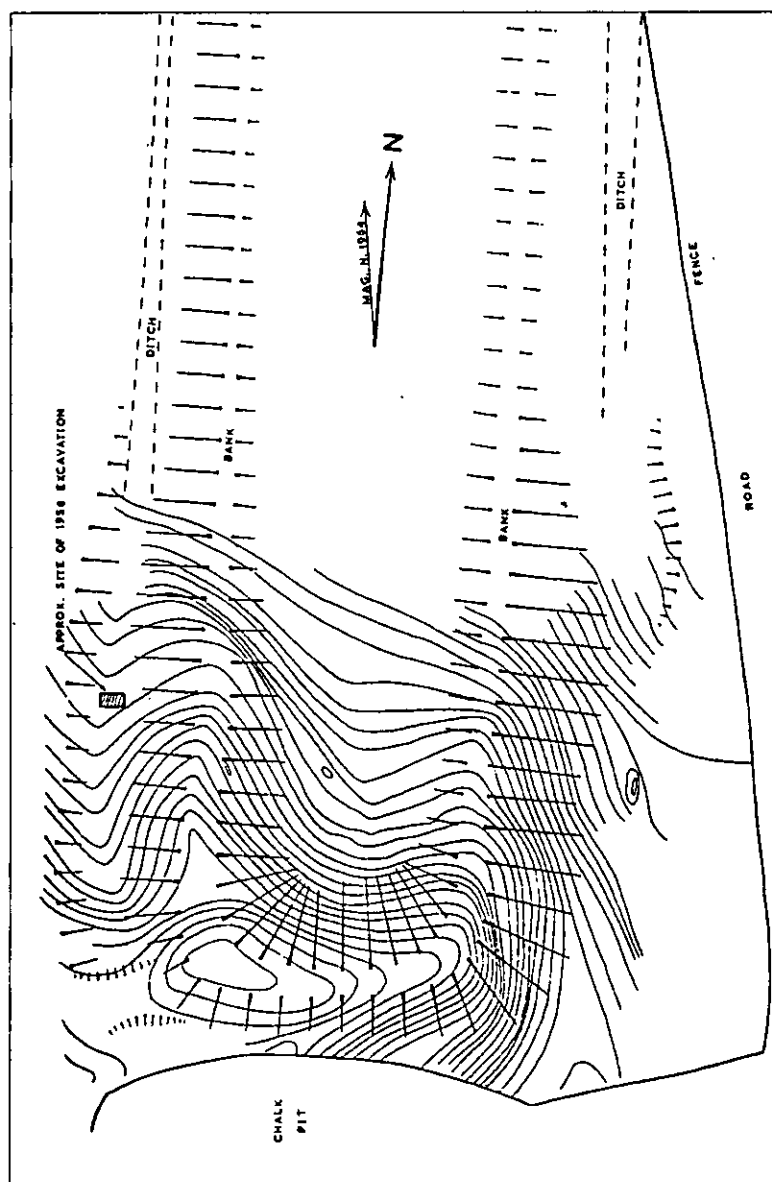
Figure 2:
The Ordnance
Survey 1st edition
6-inch map of 1850.

The terminal is shown as a marked earthwork, unified rather than in three parts as suggested by Greenwell, and the nearby round barrow is drawn prominently too. The Cursus is illustrated as being embanked with no trace of a surrounding ditch and the terminal itself is rigidly 'squared off'. A large chalk pit, presumably that referred to by Greenwell, lies adjacent to the terminal and both of the long sides survive intermittently with that on the west being perhaps better preserved. The round barrow is, likewise, drawn as a simple round mound with no enclosing ditch and it should be noted in passing that a pond or spring lies a short distance to the west of the Cursus.

Dymond (1966) shows the cursus as being completely embanked with a prominent ditch on the west ending close to the angle change on the south-west corner (Fig 3). Slight traces of a ditch were also noted along the eastern flank at this time and the general line of the ditch here could be identified as a dark strip of soil. In addition, Dymond's survey shows the engorged terminal and the western bank larger than that on the east. The contour survey accompanying this plan also shows a slightly raised south-western corner of the terminal, according well with Greenwell's findings 100 years previously; though



Figure 3:
Dymond's survey of 1966 shows the twin-peaked nature of the cursus terminal as well as paired flanking banks. © Dymond 1966



Dymond suggests that this elevation, rather than a secondary round barrow, is to some extent due to either the concentration of upcast from the ditch or the digging activities of Canon Greenwell. At the time of this survey the course of the cursus could be seen as a low earthwork in the fields to the east of the Burton Agnes Balk close to its intersection with the Great Wold Valley. There is a further suggestion that the banks and ditches could have been separated by berms, particularly on the east side near the southern

terminal. Evidence of Earlier Neolithic artefacts were noted on the ridge near to the cursus terminal and beneath the adjacent barrows. Finds from fieldwalking included axe fragments, flints, pottery, hearths, charcoal and pits, concluding that the Woldgate Ridge was intensively occupied in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age.

There is also a report on an unpublished excavation across the western ditch in 1958 by Messrs C and E Grantham of Drifffield and T Manby (Fig 6). This indicated that the ditch is 14ft. (4m) wide to a depth of nearly 5ft. (1.5m) and is shallow with a rounded bottom. The symmetrical silting pattern noted suggested a fairly rapid process on infilling but with no immediately adjacent bank material incorporated. Copious quantities of struck flints were found in the ditch and sherds of Beaker recovered from the primary silts led



the excavators to suggest (erroneously) that the Cursus was built after the 'local arrival of Beakers'.

Further work was carried out on the round barrow during the 1960s including a rescue excavation by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works in response to the continued damage to the monument (Pacitto 1972). This work uncovered a wide and deep encircling ditch and three secondary unaccompanied crouched inhumations within the barrow mound. Towthorpe Ware and much flint was found below the mound and this led the excavator to suggest that the barrow overlay an Earlier Neolithic occupation site.

Kinnes (1984, 37) discusses the landscape setting of the main monuments in the Rudston complex, noting that it is significant that all of the main cursus terminals are intervisible; surely part of the original constructional intent. At the centre of this complex, which he calls a true 'ritual landscape', and boxed in by the enclosures, is the Rudston monolith, the tallest standing stone in the British Isles at a height of 7.7m and brought to its present site from the North Sea coast, a distance of 16km. Kinnes notes further that extensive traces of Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement have been found in the area, including a number of Grooved Ware pits.

In *Altering the Earth: the Origins of Monuments in Britain and Continental Europe*, Bradley (1993) notes that the two largest cursus enclosures at Rudston establish a notional north-south axis in the local landscape. To the west lie most of the major burial monuments on the Wolds and to the east are many of the most substantial contemporary settlements and where, in addition, there are significant sources of flint and stone along the North Sea coast. Furthermore, the southern terminal of the Woldgate Cursus has been enlarged (as the Thickthorn Down end of the Dorset Cursus - McOmish & Tuck 2002) in order to resemble the external form of long barrows.

In a more recent paper Harding (1999) speculates that the cursus complex at Rudston, including the Woldgate Cursus, was part of a distinct phase of monument construction dating to between 3600-3100 BC. Harding has considered the chronological development of the Rudston complex and provided an overview of the area throughout much of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. In this he notes that the core of local contemporary settlement lay at some distance (up to 3km) away from the monumental focus, an assumption based on an analysis of the distribution of typologically distinctive flint arrowheads. Harding states that the quantity of Earlier Neolithic surface lithics is low around the Woldgate Cursus terminal (*ibid.*, 32). However, it is plausible, conversely, that this distribution pattern could simply denote hunting activity away from the core settlement areas. Other near contemporary activity close to the Woldgate Cursus terminal is represented by a series of small pits, five in number, three of which contained



Towthorpe Ware and are likely to pre-date or be contemporary with the cursus monuments.

For Harding, the Rudston Cursus enclosures played a pivotal and perhaps short-lived role in structuring the wider patterns of movement and activity in the local Neolithic landscape. Though this fails to account for the clustering of near contemporary monuments, such as henges and large round barrows, in close proximity to the cursuses. Whilst noting that their use may have been confined to small-scale periodic gatherings, perhaps involving low numbers of participants, the carefully chosen placement of the cursus monuments imposed certain restrictions, both physical and symbolic, in this part of the Great Wold Valley.



4. DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE EARTHWORKS

Summary

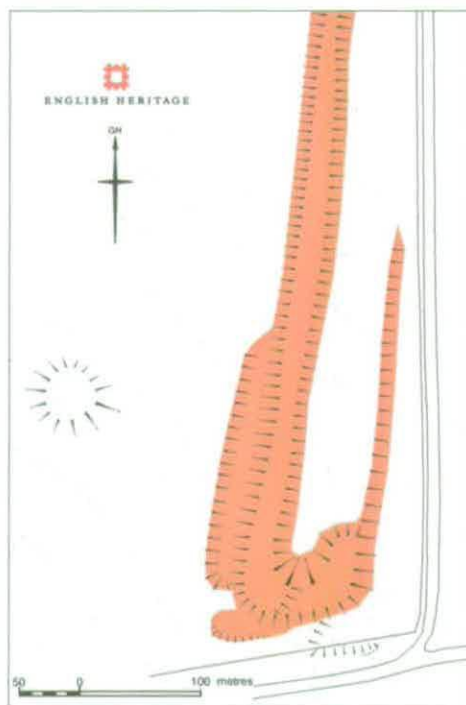
The monuments lie in a field at the junction of Wold Gate Road and Burton Agnes Balk, the route leading to the village of Rudston. This field contains the only surviving earthworks of any of the five Rudston Cursus enclosures but has, itself, been heavily over-ploughed in recent years. Adjacent to it on the west lies another heavily plough-eroded monument, a round barrow, and this together with the cursus terminal formed the focus of this current episode of survey. Both components sit within an arable field and plough damage continues at an alarming rate, with both structures a diminishing feature in the local landscape.

The Monuments (Fig 5)

The Woldgate Cursus Terminal

NGR: TA 0995 6573. NMR No: TA 06 NE 19

The cursus terminal lies at the top end of a field currently set within a heavily arable landscape. As a result the monument, or what little survives of it, is being repeatedly eroded through the continued processes of tilling and harvesting. The monument is in a highly degraded condition and continues to deteriorate rapidly. Only a very slight remnant of the parallel side banks can now be seen, traceable on the west for a distance of 250m; a shorter scarp approximately 130m in length was observed on the east and this has been truncated and destroyed by earthmoving associated with construction and maintenance of fence lines and the Burton Agnes Balk road. In comparison, the terminal earthwork itself is relatively well pronounced but is suffering the same fate as the remainder of the monument.





The Cursus as it survives today consists of narrow partly embanked enclosure with an internal width (internal bank base to edge of scarp) varying between 25.0m and 30.0m; with a clear indication that it widens out as it approaches the terminal. A bank is evident on the western side and around the terminal, with a basal width of 20.0m along the sides narrowing to a crest here 5.0 to 11.0m wide. The bank at this point stands to a height, at best, of 0.2m and is flanked by a length of external ditch for 90.0m leading from the right-angled turn at the terminal. The terminal earthwork stands proud of the associated earthworks and has the appearance of having been rebuilt at some stage. It survives now as a broad bank set on a roughly east to west alignment and although it has been spread about by ploughing it still survives to a height of 0.4m above ground level in places. It is noticeably curved in outline, contrasting with earlier 'squared-off' depictions, and has a basal width of 25.0m to 30.0m narrowing to a crest 10.0m to 15.0m wide. A profile placed longitudinally across the terminal earthwork (Fig 4, 'A-B') produced only superficial evidence for the distinct 'corner' mounds noted by Greenwell 140 years ago. But this absence may be due wholly to the continued destructive impact of cultivation on the monument. Survey did produce evidence, however, for a slight raised area close to the south-eastern corner. Here, the rear face of the bank arcs back on itself and isolates a

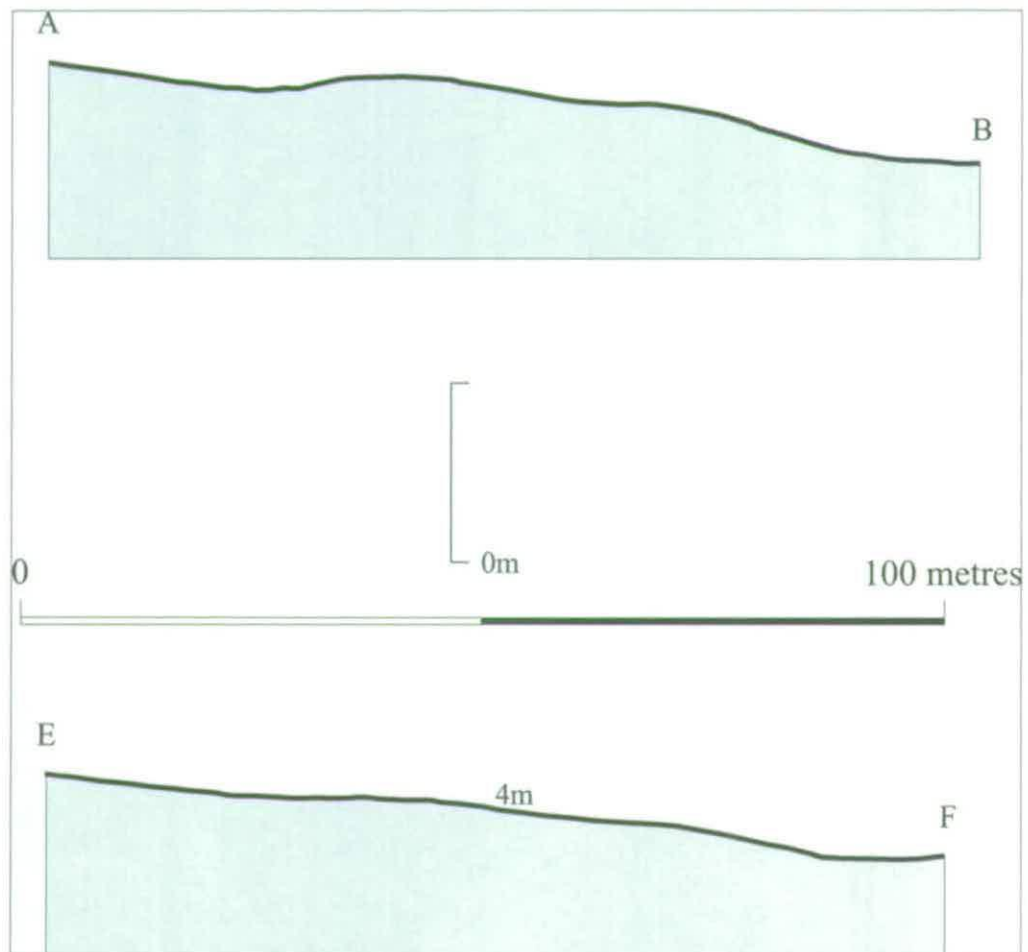
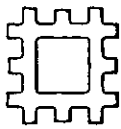


Figure 4:
Profiles across the southern end of the Woldgate Cursus. The upper section clearly shows the two raised points at the terminal corners. The lower profile (E-F) displays a very shallow ditch on the west as well as an internal bank on that side.



small raised section of bank, and this may be the remains of a ploughed down mound. In addition, another slight scarp 0.1m high at the opposite corner may be the remnants of the round barrow noted during the antiquarian investigations.

The eastern arm of the Cursus survives now as a simple east-facing scarp 130.0m in length and standing to a height of, at best, 0.2m above external ground level. No trace of any accompanying bank could be seen and it is possible that none existed, given the very noticeable bank terminal close to the south-east angle. If so, this scarp represents the surviving inner face of a ditch. It may be that a shallow bank was built along this flank (and a bank is shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6-inch map) but that it was of a lesser magnitude than its western partner. This asymmetry is borne out by the cross-section (Fig 4, 'E-F') and suggests that the western bank was constructed on a much grander scale.

Two short lengths of ditch can be seen at the terminal. One, adjacent to the south-west corner, 25m in length, has a depth of 0.15m and overall width of 4.0m to 13.0m. The other, at the south-east corner, is better preserved at 0.35m deep for distance of 30.0m and is undoubtedly the remains of a chalk pit dug here in the early 19th century.

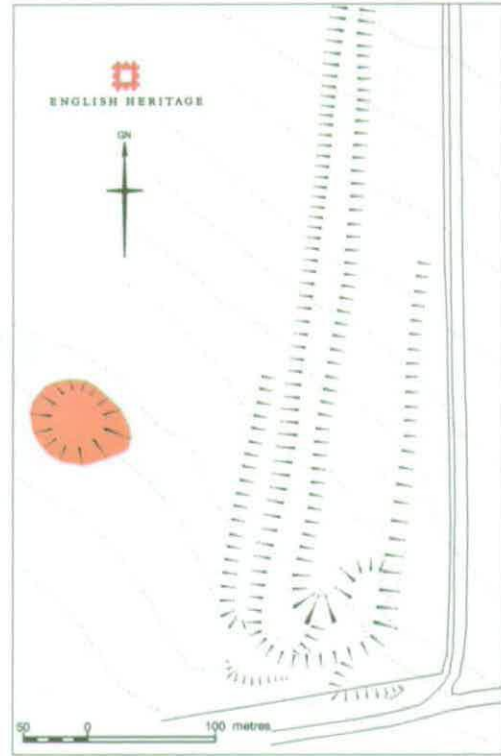
The location of the Woldgate Cursus terminal was carefully chosen to maximise both its visual impact and to afford excellent views of the surrounding landscape. The terminal sits on the eastern shoulder of a conical chalk knoll which rises to a height of 92.0m above Ordnance Datum, 0.5km to the east. The land rises again to the west only by 10.0m but the whole effect is of the Cursus terminal nestling on the edge of a saddle between two knolls. It sits at that point on the knoll where the topography starts to tilt northwards towards the valley of the Gypsy Race and this is clearly the visual focus of the monument. The terminal remains relatively well hidden when approached from the south and only becomes noticeable when within a short distance of it, certainly less than 100.0m. Along the course of the surveyed section, the enclosure tilts very gently towards the east as it crosses obliquely the line of a dry valley aligned roughly north-west to south-east.



Round Barrow

NGR: TA 0988 6583. NMR No: TA 06 NE 15

This much reduced round barrow now survives as a low oval shaped mound with a basal width of 42.0m on its longest axis rising to a circular flat-topped summit 22.0m in diameter. The barrow now stands to a height (at best) of 0.2m above ground level. However, the ditch noted during the 1968 excavations has left no surface trace and, generally, the dimensions recorded suggest that ploughing has substantially spread the mound since the time of Greenwell's observations.



The barrow is an outlier from the much larger 'cemetery' on the slopes of the knoll to the west of the Woldgate Cursus and is one of seven round barrows loosely arranged around the Cursus terminal. The barrow lies on the south-western, uphill, side of re-entrant that approaches from the north-west and from it there are good views of the surrounding countryside and, in particular, the Great Wold Valley.



5. DISCUSSION

The Woldgate Cursus extends for a distance of approximately 2.6km from its terminal on the chalk ridge to the south of Rudston village in a field known as 'The Sheepwalk' to a point near Bridlington Gate some distance to the north of the village. The Cursus maintains a largely straight course on an axis bearing 15° to the east of north. The only deviation from this course is on the flanks of the chalk ridge to the south of Rudston village and although it may be that the alteration here reflects an original constructional intent (perhaps to avoid a pre-existing structure) it also remains possible that the gentle curve arose simply because of the difficulties in constructing an earthwork enclosure up and over a fairly sharp escarpment edge. A similar swerve occurs in the line of the Dorset Cursus and this is explained either as the irregular junction of two separate cursus components or as a change in alignment in order to enclose the Gussage Cow Down long barrow (McOmish & Tuck 2002, 35). To the south of the oscillation, the course of the enclosure reverts to a more north-easterly alignment, close to but not exactly, reflecting the line further to the north. The straightened northern section stretches for close on to 2km and follows such a regular path that it is likely to have been aligned on some important landscape component of which there is now no surface indication. At the opposite end, to the south of the deviation, the course correction implies, too, that the terminal configuration was predetermined and also, possibly that the Cursus consists of two conjoined elements, their junction marked by the angle change. Indeed, bearing these points in mind it seems that the overall course of the Woldgate Cursus was prefigured and sought to connect two already important nodes in the landscape. There is no indication of earlier pre-Cursus activity at its northern end but at the southern terminal excavation and fieldwalking has produced evidence for substantial pre-Cursus development and it may be, for example, that it formed a pathway connecting significant settlement locales. The southern terminal sits at a height of c. 80.0m above Ordnance Datum, much higher than the corresponding height at the northern terminal which lies at 47.0m above Ordnance Datum. Nonetheless, both terminals are intervisible and, again, this seems part of the original constructional intent. The Woldgate Cursus is also closely associated with the Gypsy Race stream, the most prominent watercourse in the northern section of the Yorkshire Wolds. The line of the Woldgate Cursus is broken as it crosses the Gypsy Race but the alignment is identical either side and it must be presumed that its course was continuous when built. The apparent interruption is due in part to the impact of cultivation but also as a result of the build-up of colluvium and river valley alluvium.

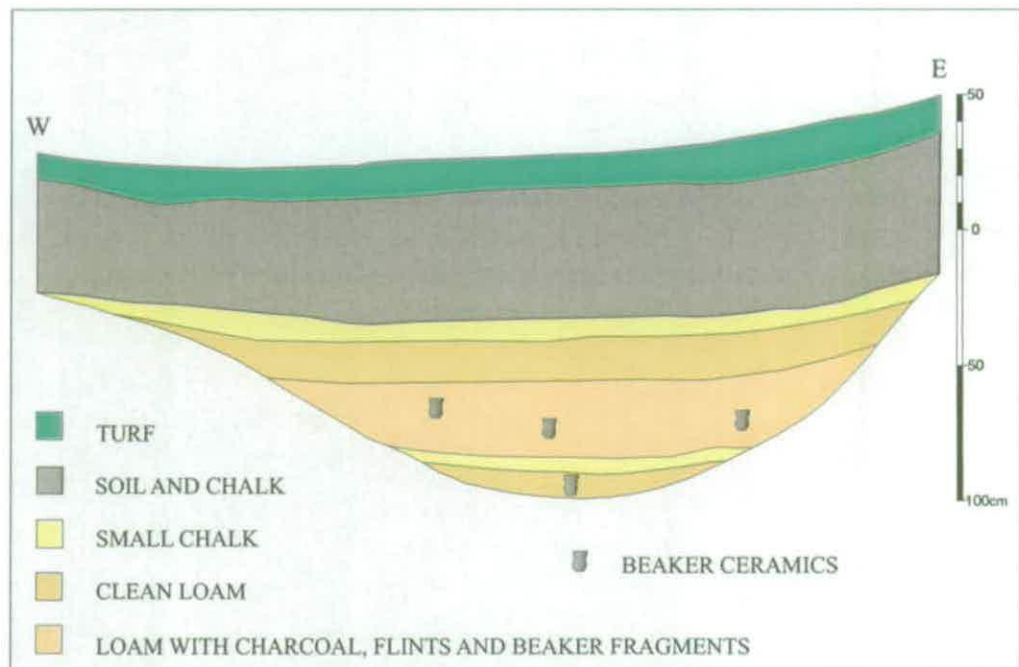
Along its entire length the Cursus maintains a fairly standard external width of between 60.0m and 80.0m. The more substantial dimensions were noted on the gentle slopes to the south of Rudston. The aerial transcription (RCHME 1997, Fig 10, p28) suggests that the line of the Cursus is broken in a number of places, possibly by entrance breaks, but

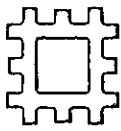


these might be a result of later unspecified damage unconnected to the original use of the enclosure. The eastern line is noticeably more segmented than its parallel neighbour and, furthermore, it follows a more sinuous course. Similar observations have been made at other cursus enclosures and are usually interpreted as evidence for the sequence of construction. Likewise, at Rudston it is plausible that the straighter, more consistent, western bank and ditch were laid out first and that the enclosure was completed by off-setting from this. The English Heritage survey very clearly indicated that the western flank is better preserved than its eastern counterpart, points noted in earlier surveys by Dymond and the Ordnance Survey, and suggest that this reflects, largely, the original form of the monument. Although ploughing has erased almost all of the Woldgate Cursus, the remains at the southern terminal show that, currently, only the western flank consists of a pronounced bank and ditch. The boundary on the east now survives as a ledge, possibly the inner slope of the destroyed ditch, but any trace of the accompanying bank depicted by surveyors ranging from the Ordnance Survey 1st edition map in 1850 through to Dymond in 1966, has been erased. Colluvium could be masking the bank on the east but it is suggested here that the western flank was built on a more monumental scale and so has survived better the impact of cultivation.

Profiles across the Cursus show the asymmetrical nature of the earthwork and it may be that its final form originates from an episode of re-building. Published sections taken from the excavation in the western ditch close to the terminal display a marked symmetrical fill with no evidence for an episode of re-cutting (Fig 6).

Figure 6:
Section across the ditch on the western flank of the Woldgate Cursus (the location is marked on Figure 3) excavated in 1958. The ditch displays a markedly symmetrical fill and Beaker ceramics were noted in the lower levels. (Based on Dymond 1966)





The fills also show that there was negligible slippage of soil from the flanking bank suggesting that it was separated from the ditch by a wide berm or that it was supported by a revetment. The ditch may also have been backfilled soon after it was dug but regardless, the occurrence of Beaker ceramics in the primary and secondary fills, once seen as dating the construction of the monument, clearly relates to an episode of re-use. The ultimate morphology of the Woldgate Cursus, with a single prominent bank and ditch, recalls the configuration at a number of other cursus enclosures with enlarged linear components such as Scorton (Topping 1982) or Stanwell (John Lewis, pers com). It is a morphology noted by a number of authors to incorporate elements of both cursus enclosures and bank barrows (e.g. Cleaven Dyke; Barclay & Maxwell 1998).

The re-use of the Woldgate Cursus

The southern terminal of the Woldgate Cursus is similarly enlarged, a point first noted by Bradley (1993). It is unclear whether or not this enhancement was an original structural device or a later adaptation, regardless, the form of the earthwork strongly recalls that of other, possibly earlier, burial mounds. In building part of the Cursus as a skeuomorph of a long barrow (an already established component in the Neolithic landscape of the Yorkshire Wolds) a visual linkage was established. The linkage may also have extended to a symbolic role, as a way of 'tying' the later monument into the ancestral world and thereby setting it as part of the natural order of things. Thus the Cursus may have become imbued with mythological power within a wider framework of social ritual. Excavations firstly in the 19th-century by Canon Greenwell and more recently by Dymond make it clear that the terminal was subjected to a number of episodes of activity during the Later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Inhumation burials associated with Beaker ceramics were uncovered at the terminal and in the bank extending north from it. One of these had been placed within a cist and included evidence of a wooden structure, possibly a coffin, and others were disturbed by the insertion of later inhumations. Given this intensity of activity it seems likely that the terminal earthwork was enlarged as part of the sepulchral process. Greenwell comments on the raised nature ('barrow-like') at either end of the terminal bank and this was noted too by Dymond, though with the qualification that the alterations might result from earlier antiquarian diggings. However, it is worth noting in passing that similar enhancements have been recorded at a range of henge monuments (Topping 1992, 262-3). The present survey also emphasises the peaked nature of the terminal but no conclusion can now be reached about the original form of the earthwork. It is unlikely, however, to derive wholly from the antiquarian investigations as the mounded morphology was commented upon by Greenwell, himself the most interactive of these early fieldworkers. The enlargement of the terminal may have served a number of purposes but two of the most important are that it brought a visual focus to this part of



the Cursus and it served as a marker for other activities. It may also have provided a good platform from which observation of the surrounding countryside was possible. Indeed, the vista looking northward from the terminal includes a large section of the Great Wold Valley, in particular, that point where the valley shifts in direction from an east-west to a more north-south alignment. In addition, the terminal lies at a point on the valley slope where a view of the sea at Bridlington Bay some 8.0km distant, becomes possible. Ground observations show that by moving a matter of metres away from the terminal the line of sight is broken, suggesting an intentional visual linkage between the monument and the sea.

The Woldgate Cursus in the Wider Landscape

The Woldgate Cursus is one of four similar monuments in this section of the Great Wold Valley (Fig 7) and even more remarkably all are associated with the largest standing stone in the British Isles, the Rudston Monolith (plate). Nearly 20km of cursus enclosures have so far been recorded at Rudston and at least one other possible cursus has been noted close to the southern edge of Rudston village adjacent to the Woldgate Cursus.

All lie in locations referring to and incorporating segments of the river as well as the valley slope and there is a clear preference for the terminals to be sited on higher ground. It is plausible that in a largely deforested environment all of the cursus terminals (in this complex) would have been intervisible. The Great Wold Valley would, undoubtedly, have been used as a routeway by earlier communities and the monumental focus at Rudston lies at that point where the valley turns abruptly northwards. Here, the valley floor widens to a width of nearly 2km and other dry re-entrants lead off from it to the north-east and north-west and so the cursuses lie in an area where natural routeways intersect.

The largest cursus, Cursus D - the Gypsy Race Cursus (TA 06 NE 48 - TA 096 679) - extends for a distance of nearly 4km on a (roughly) north-south alignment and has been completely destroyed by ploughing and other later activity. Only the northern terminal can be seen on aerial photographs and this is 'squared-off' and associated with other Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments including ring ditches and what appears to be an elongated enclosure c. 90.0m in length, possibly a ploughed-out long or bank barrow. The layout here is strongly reminiscent of that at the northern, Pentridge Down, terminal of the Dorset Cursus, which is similarly associated with both earlier and later burial monuments. It may be that the small oblong ditched enclosure pre-dates the



Gypsy Race Cursus and acted as a guide to its eventual placement. The southern terminal is lost now in the developments on the edge of Rudston village but it is clear that any extension would take it c. 200.0m to the west of the Rudston monolith (in its present

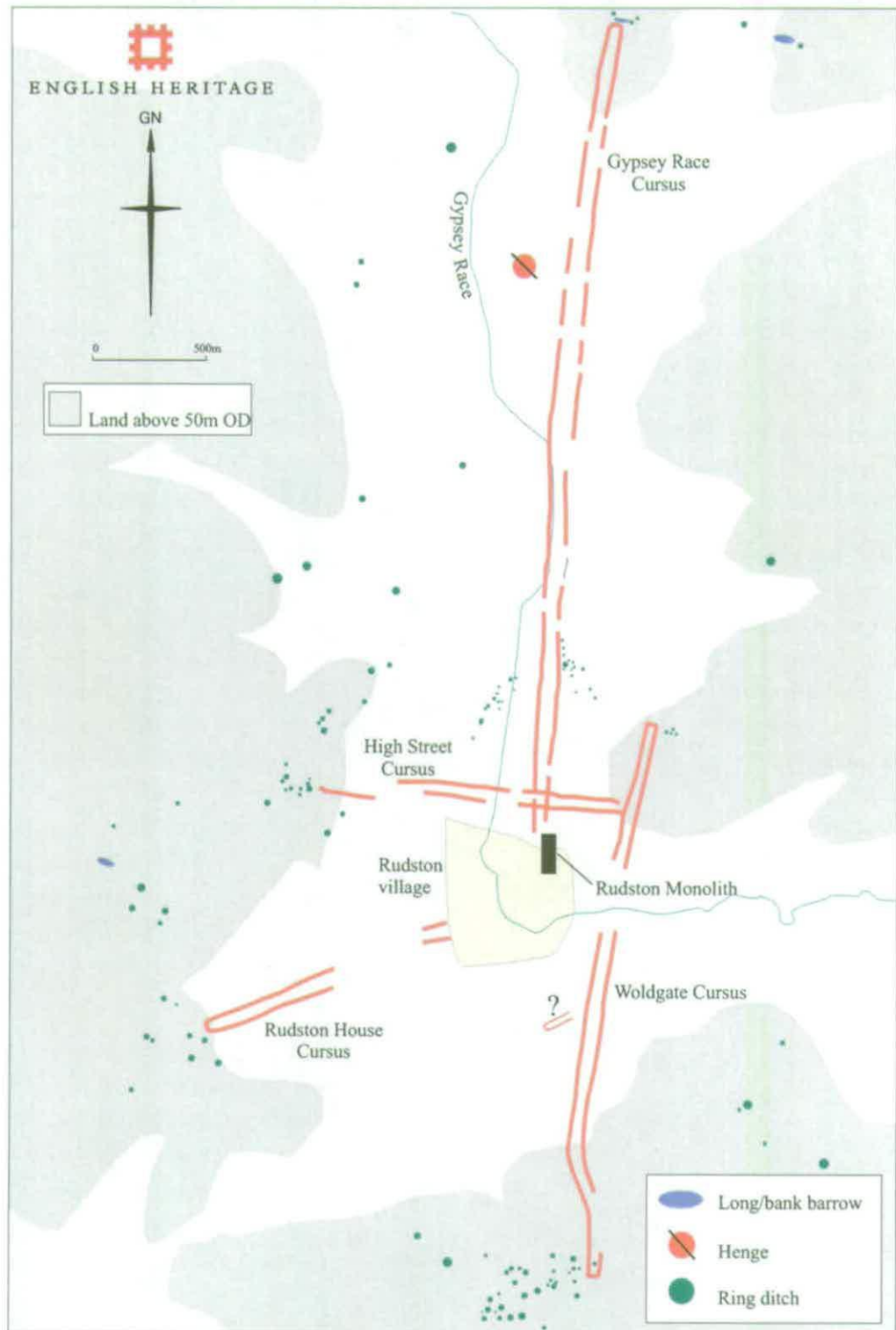


Figure 7:
The Rudston Complex showing the layout of the five cursus enclosures and their relationship with contemporary and later monuments. (Based on Stoertz 1997)

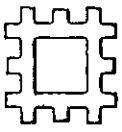


position). The Cursus has been overlain at a number of points by Later Iron Age and Romano-British fields and settlements but in other instances it has clearly influenced the layout of ditched paddocks (contra Stoertz 1997, 27). By inference, however, it is reasonable to surmise that the majority of the earthwork form of the Gypsy Race Cursus had been heavily eroded by the Middle Iron Age.

The Gypsy Race Cursus crosses another (C), known as the High Street Cursus (TA 06 NE 47 - TA 099 680), at right angles. This Cursus, again fully erased by ploughing, cuts across the river valley perpendicularly on an approximately east-west alignment, but it survives in too fragmentary a state to be categorical about overall length and the location of terminals. However, like the other components in this complex, the Cursus incorporates high points at its extremities as well as a section of the Gypsy Race itself. Only a stretch of 1.2km can now be traced on aerial photographs and this shows, perhaps, a more regular northern line; that on the south is frequently interrupted but this may be due, in part, to the impact of later settlement and fields. The chronological relationship with its contiguous neighbour is ill-defined despite trial excavations in 1978 by Kinnes (1984, 37). The junction of the two cursus enclosures was heavily disturbed by later Romano-British settlement activity but his findings indicate the likely contemporaneity between the Gypsy Race and the High Street Cursuses.

The Rudston House Cursus (TA 06 NE 46 – TA 092 674) lies to the south-west of the village and can be traced, intermittently, over a distance of 1.4km. Only one terminal can now be identified lying close to 55.0m above Ordnance Datum on the slopes of a re-entrant leading to the Gypsy Race. From this point the platform hosting the Rudston monolith would have been visible but the alignment of the Cursus does not bring it on a direct course with the standing stone, instead passing some 300m to the south. Again, it must be assumed that the destruction of this monument took place at an early, possibly prehistoric, date but it does seem probable that parts of it survived into the Late Iron Age. Paddocked fields of later prehistoric/Romano-British date cluster around the south-western terminal of the Cursus and a triple-ditched earthwork skirts past it. All of these elements appear to have been influenced in their layout by the Cursus. Similarly, the ditched field system lying to the north of the Cursus takes its axial cue from the earlier linear enclosure.

Another, shorter, cursus enclosure lies to the west of the Woldgate Cursus, on the southern fringe of Rudston village in an area later occupied by a Late Iron Age/Romano-British settlement. This 'mini-cursus' extends for a distance of 180m on a south-west to north-east axis, is 40m wide and clearly discernible on aerial photographs where it lies on a different alignment to the overlying later settlement. This, again, suggests that the cursus enclosure here had been razed at a stage before the settlement and its fields were built. Only the western terminal can now be identified on the aerial



photographs and appears to be 'squared-off' in the same manner as the main cursus enclosures. As with the others, it is associated with ring ditches and one large individual lies adjacent to the northern corner of the terminal. The cursus has been built in a low-lying position, one that might have been prone to flooding, and is aligned to provide a view across the Woldgate Cursus, along the valley floor of the Gypsy Race. No corresponding gap in the line of the Woldgate Cursus could be seen perhaps implying that the smaller enclosure is later in date. There is certainly no visual connection with the Rudston monolith (Plate 1).

This monolith is now incorporated into the Rudston village churchyard built on a west facing spur, that projects into the Gypsy Race valley. It is approximately 8.0m high but was obviously much taller originally as the tapering top has been broken off and is now covered by a lead hood. Excavations by Strickland in the 18th century suggested that the stone extends to a depth of several metres below the ground. The spur is markedly flat-topped and has the appearance of having been artificially enhanced most likely to provide a suitable platform for the church. This must have occurred at an early date, as the earthwork remains of medieval close boundaries overlie the lower slopes of the spur. It is also plausible, however, that this levelling-off occurred at an earlier date and was intended to provide a viewing platform to and from the stone. Debate surrounds the origin of the stone. It is composed of gritstone, the nearest outcrop of which occurs at Cayton and Cornelian Bays 16km to the east, but there is a suggestion that the stone may have been carried as part of glacial flow from its point of origin. Kinnes (1984, 37) suggests that the monolith marks the topographical and ritual focus of the cursus layout but it forms the focus of only one of the cursus enclosures here.



Plate 1:
*The Rudston
Monolith.*
© C. Tuck



The Rudston Complex: Origins and Functions

This work together with that of Stoertz clearly shows a landscape of great intensity with a wide range of monuments dating to the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. The concentration of certainly four, probably five cursus enclosures in such a small area is unique in a British context and the juxtaposition with a massive standing stone is unparalleled. Unfortunately, there are no clues as to the sequence of cursus construction in this area; the results of the excavations undertaken by Kinnes across both the High Street and the Gypsy Race Cursuses were inconclusive suggesting the contemporaneity of both monuments.

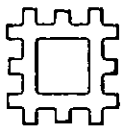
The disposition of the cursus enclosures in this area of the Great Wold Valley has led to the search for a physical 'focus' or central core for this activity with a general assumption that the Rudston monolith is the likeliest candidate. This is clearly not the case as the none of the Rudston cursuses is aligned on or incorporates the stone within its boundaries. There is, of course, a possibility that the stone has been moved in historical times to its present location but it does seem likely that the stone was erected after the phases of cursus construction. A context for this may lie with the episodes of Beaker re-use of nearby monuments.

It is clear that no one single explanation of function will suffice for the complex development of the Rudston cursuses, the other attendant built features and their interplay with the natural environment in this section of the Great Wold Valley during the late 4th and early 3rd millennia BC. The dating of the cursus enclosures here is equally imprecise. No radiocarbon assays are available and the Woldgate Cursus is imprecisely dated by the associated material culture recovered from antiquarian investigations as well as more recent episodes of excavation and fieldwalking. These all suggest that this cursus may have been built in the mid to late 4th millennium BC (Harding 1999, 32) and that there were phases of re-use principally associated with, firstly, Grooved Ware, then Beaker ceramics.

The term 'cursus' was first coined by the antiquarian William Stukeley in his work on Salisbury Plain and in particular on his observances at the elongated linear enclosure straddling Stonehenge bottom to the north of the stone circle. Stukeley characterised the enclosure as

'[resembling] a course suitable for the racing of chariots by the ancient Britons'

(1740, 41)



The work of ET Leeds (1934) and OGS Crawford (1935) were instrumental in confirming the early date of these monuments but utilitarian interpretations were still favoured until the middle stages of the 20th-century and Atkinson's considerations of the Dorset Cursus (1955). At this time he reached the conclusion that the Cursus served as an arena for some form of ritual procession which may have been associated with the cult of the dead. In more recent years, Loveday's work (1985), has been instrumental in confirming the role of cursūs, and has also shown the link between these and other elongated Neolithic monuments such as long mortuary enclosures and bank barrows. Loveday's definition of cursūs remains valid

'elongated parallel sided sites normally totally enclosed by their defining ditch or pits, but on very rare occasions having one open end they may possess either internal banks or more rarely an axial mound'

(1985, 33)

Briefly, the current favoured interpretations of cursus function have been summarised by Barclay and Maxwell (1998, 114-5) as follows:

1. *structures for formal processions or orchestrated journeys of experience;*
2. *structures linking pre-existing monuments or significant places;*
3. *structures demarcating an alignment on a place, object or astronomical event, rather than linking anything;*
4. *symbolic or physical barriers between areas of different significance (e.g. wild and domestic); may involve symbolic control of access between the two*
5. *symbolic 'project': the physical expression of a social or ideological need;*
6. *a temenos: an area of land marked off and devoted to the gods.*

Harding (1999) has developed a number of these themes and suggested that the Rudston Cursus complex monumentalised spatial and behavioural patterns of use and movement within this part of the Wolds landscape:

'Their extreme linearity effectively dislocated the open flow of people and social information...the cursuses may have therefore acted as symbolic boundaries which constrained movement and interaction across the wider landscape.'

(1999, 33-4)



Plate 2:
A number of lithics were found during the earthwork survey, including these shown here. Tranchet derivative arrowhead (top); bifacially worked leaf-shaped arrowheads (centre left and right) and; small D-shaped scraper. These provide evidence for activity both pre-dating and contemporary with the Woldgate Cursus. 2K/03342

The location of five imposing earthwork enclosures cutting across the valley floor would have physically inhibited the easy flow of people along this route and may have led to the disruption of local communication networks and paths. Harding's assumption, derived from the results of surface collection analyses, that contemporary or earlier settlement activity was based at some distance from the monumental complexes, is less reliable.



During the course of the survey, a number of leaf-shaped arrowheads, as well as serrated blades and fragments of polished flint, were noted scattered in the vicinity of the Woldgate Cursus terminal (Plate 2). This is all suggestive of 4th millennium BC activity and can be added to the inventory of large quantities of earlier material, including lithics and ceramics, that were found beneath the Cursus and underneath the nearby round barrow. Furthermore, these together with the presence of a small number of Grooved Ware pits in the near vicinity points to a sufficiently dense concentration of activity, possibly including settlement, both pre-dating and contemporary with the construction of the cursus monuments.

All of the Rudston Cursus monuments are associated with the Gypsy Race stream – all incorporate an element of the river within their boundaries – and it is clear that the river valley forms the ‘focus’ of the monuments here. As has been stated previously the Great Wold is one of the most important valleys carving a route through the chalk downs and connecting the coast with a lower-lying hinterland. For mobile communities this river valley would have been a vital pathway through the landscape as well as providing a good home base and the positioning of the cursus monuments formalises this relationship in a metaphorical sense. The inclusion of flowing water within the bounds of the cursus is frequently observed and it seems plausible that the river was appropriated into some form of symbolic or ritual behaviour. And here it is worth noting the proximity of an ancient spring to the Woldgate Cursus southern terminal. The river could be seen as a metaphorical linkage to ideas of new life and re-birth and for Brophy (1998) the form of the linear cursus is, itself, a direct analogy with that of a watercourse.

Harding’s (1999) presumption about the short-lived impact of the Rudston cursūs is clearly questionable given the density of monuments that were built in this locale. Most of these have either a direct physical or visual linkage to the cursus enclosures here. The most prominent of these is the large henge with opposed entrances that lies close to the western flank of the Gypsy Race Cursus, 1 km from its northern terminal. It is likely that the henge was built some time after the construction of the Cursus, and if so, it certainly implies a longer-lasting significance for the earthwork enclosure than that anticipated by Harding.

Similarly, later round burial mounds are well represented in the area around each of the cursus enclosures but, interestingly often set away from the monuments themselves (Fig 8). This is seen most clearly at the southern end of the Woldgate Cursus where the main clusters of later round barrows lie on the slopes overlooking but at some distance from the earlier monument and this dislocation is a pattern repeated at other cursus enclosures throughout the British Isles. Often, as at Woldgate, only a very few isolated mounds are placed close to the cursus, instead the juxtaposition is often between earlier long barrows or henge monuments and later round barrows. That a visual linkage was maintained



stresses the significance of connectivity between monuments across time, the linkages between different sorts of burial memorial and, ultimately, their integration within a symbolically charged landscape.

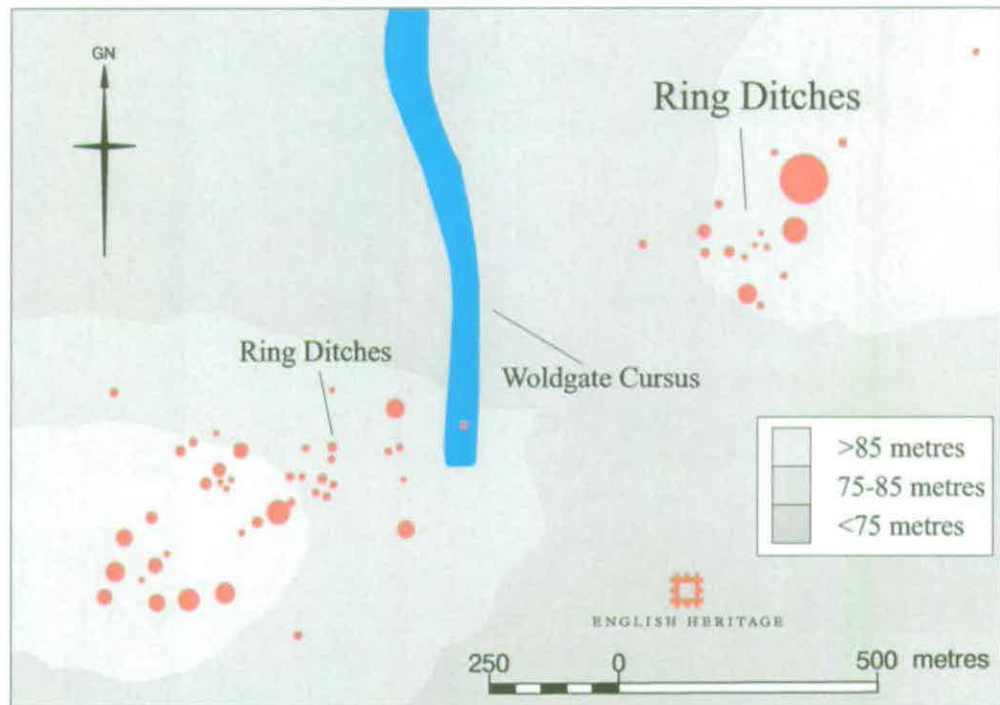
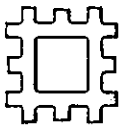


Figure 8:
The distribution of later burial monuments close to the Woldgate Cursus terminal. Note that only a few mounds lie near the Cursus, the remainder cluster on slopes some distance away.

Other later activity is well represented in this section of the Great Wold Valley and it is apparent that each Cursus within the Rudston complex is partly overlain by Late Iron Age/Romano-British settlements and fields. Furthermore, square barrow cemeteries of the same date can be seen flanking the line of the Gypsy Race Cursus to the north of Rudston village.

The construction of these later structures, from Late Neolithic/Bronze Age round barrows to Late Iron Age/Romano-British settlements, fields and cemeteries, would have led to the slighting of any pre-existing earthworks. But is clear that there was a frequently observed desire to physically integrate the contemporary and the pre-existing monumental landscape. This association may be seen as an 'appropriation' and could have related to shifts in underlying ideological goals. In all of this, legitimacy would seem to have been underpinned by the power of the ancestral world here represented by the cursus enclosures at Rudston.



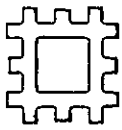
6. METHODOLOGY

The field investigation was undertaken by David McOmish and Cathy Tuck during winter 2001. The measured survey of the Woldgate Cursus and adjacent round barrow was carried out entirely digitally by using a Leica T805 Electronic Theodolite with integral datalogger from a baseline traverse of two stations. The resulting plan was plotted at 1:1000 scale via KeyTerra-Firma, AutoCAD and CorelDraw software.

All of the CAD-based drawings were prepared using CorelDraw 9 software by David McOmish. The report was researched and written by David McOmish, commented upon by Cathy Tuck and edited by Peter Topping.

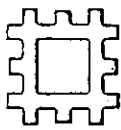
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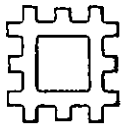


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