

Medieval defensive ditch



If you are looking for ancient landscape features, then January and February are normally very good times. The vegetation has died back and been knocked down by rain, wind and maybe snow. This enables you to see the 'lumps and bumps' which bear witness to ancient activity. One such is a ditch which is outside of the Embsay and Eastby parish, but which had a major role to play in medieval Embsay and Eastby history.

If you take the gentle walk from Black Park at Halton Heights towards Bolton Abbey, a substantial wall blocks your way. There is, of course, a gate through the wall but it is the foundation of the wall that is more interesting. If you leave the path, be very careful as the ground is very uneven. It's best to wear stout walking shoes.

The ditch is on the Barden side of the wall. I had always thought that this was a ditch that was dug for the Deer-park built in the late fifteenth century by the Shepherd Lord Clifford. The sturdy wall was probably built for the deer-park, but it used the ditch that already ran along the Bolton Abbey-Barden boundary as its foundation.

The ditch was dug in 1318. It was in the late spring of this year when Scottish armies invaded this part of Yorkshire. They came across country from Knaresborough. The majority of the army, with its war booty, probably crossed the Wharfe at Ilkley and followed the old Roman road to and through Skipton. But some of the army crossed the river at Barden, which was probably a ford at the time. This smaller part of the army was able to maraud through Bolton Abbey lands, through Halton East and Embsay and Eastby, to re-join the main army at Skipton. The army did not stay long, but the damage was severe.

In order to reduce the damage from any further raids, one of the Bolton priests paid a very large sum of money to dig a defensive ditch 'around Bolton Moor'. The ditch runs from Barden Beck, which is steep sided at this point, up the hill and into the boggy ground that is the start of Green Beck which is the boundary between Bolton Abbey and Halton East. If you are able to stand in the ditch, and imagine it without 700 years of erosion, and probably with thorn branches and stakes stuck in the top, it was clearly a significant defence against raiders who wanted to steal and move on quickly. They would not take the time to break down the defences, they would just move on to the next place.

This appears to be exactly what happened in 1319 when the Scots raiders returned. The ditch stopped them descending again on Bolton but diverted their full force to Halton East, Embsay and Eastby. In the year after the invasion those three villages were only able to pay 20% of their normal rents. It is likely that the animals had been killed or taken away and the people that the Scots could capture taken back to Scotland as captives or slaves.

This was part of the history of the 14th century in the north of England and south of Scotland. Each raided the other's lands, stole animals and killed or captured the ordinary people trying to live out their normal lives.

If you want to read more about Embsay and Eastby history at this time then the Embsay Library has a copy of the book about the villages, *Crisis in the Early 14th Century*, to borrow or buy.

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