Between Ferrybridge and Catterick the modern A1 carries more than 50,000 vehicles a day through West and North Yorkshire. On its route this road passes close to a number of significant but often overlooked monuments that are of considerable antiquity. The earliest of these were long, narrow enclosures that were built in the Middle Neolithic period (c 5,300 years ago) and are known as cursus. These were followed by massive ditched and banked enclosures called henges and then smaller monuments, including barrows, which were built up to the Middle Bronze Age (c 3,600 years ago). There are also Iron Age settlements and Roman towns, forts and villas in the road’s hinterland. North from Boroughbridge the A1 follows the course of Dere Street Roman road.
The Landscape Setting of the A1 Corridor

Between Boroughbridge and Catterick the A1 travels a route with the Pennines to the west and the low lying vales of York and Mowbray to the east. The road corridor and its hinterland are predominantly rural, with a few larger settlements (including the cathedral city of Ripon and the market town of Bedale) and numerous villages and hamlets. Many of the settlements have medieval origins. Further south there are large arable fields and small but frequent pockets of woodland, but where the road runs between the Rivers Ure and the Swale patchworks of small hedged fields begin to feature, as do pockets of permanent pasture and remnants of former wetland.

Grand houses and parkland feature in this area and these places are characterised by formal gardens, carefully landscaped water gardens, managed vistas and deer parks, although arable cultivation has encroached into many former parklands.

A more recent impact on the landscape came in the early 20th century with the construction of seven airfields alongside the A1 and the River Swale. These airfields, some still active, others abandoned or re-used, are distinct micro-landscapes. They are characterised by expanses of concrete or tarmac for runways and hard standing interspersed with grassland or arable, arrangements of huts, buildings and structures of brick and metal and substantial embanked pens and blast defences.

The rounded, western end of the Thornborough cursus.

Cursus monuments are very elongated rectilinear enclosures, typically more than 1km long. The two long sides are near parallel and the ends may be square or rounded. They may be formed by ditches and/or banks. Cursus are thought to date from the middle to late Neolithic period and they were probably used for ceremonial or ritual activities. Cursus were often built near or on top of earlier monuments and then built over themselves. Two good examples are known in this area: at Scotton and at Thornborough. A short section of a third possible cursus has been found near Hutton Moor Henge.

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Henges are circular or oval platforms surrounded by substantial ditches, banks or combinations of the two. Nationwide they vary in size but the examples in this area are all approximately 100m across. Some henges survive as massive earthworks and some examples are barely perceptible from the ground and have only been identified through air photographs or excavation. The henges were probably built as ceremonial or ritual centres; the communal act of building may have had an important social role. They may also have served as trading centres and meeting places. Henges are generally of late Neolithic origin but may have continued in use for a long time.

Round barrows are roughly hemispherical mounds of earth, turf or stones covering single or multiple graves. The mounds were often surrounded by ditches, sometimes with gaps or berms in between. The mounds ranged from just a few metres to more than 30m across. Round barrow building began in the Neolithic period but proliferated in the early to middle Bronze Age. Some barrows were used and re-used over long periods of time. Round barrows are significantly more numerous than the cursus and henge monuments. Today a few round barrows in this area survive as massive earthworks but far more have been levelled due to agricultural activity. Some are now only visible from the air, as cropmarked ring ditches. Many barrows were disturbed by antiquarians in the 19th century.

Air reconnaissance and excavation have identified several linear pit arrangements. These usually take the form of parallel rows of pits and are often found in conjunction with the henge monuments. An example at Thornborough has been excavated and dated to the Middle Bronze Age. Here many of the pits were packed with stones and are thought to have held timber posts. Pit-defined features and other small monuments are often only discovered or recognised during excavation so the evidence from the air photos or geophysical survey is likely to under-represent the full diversity of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments.
The henges and other monuments
A map of the monuments lying close to the A1 between Boroughbridge and Catterick
Catterick Henge was built on top of an earlier Neolithic burial cairn. It was made of rounded river cobbles and earth that were probably collected in the surrounding area. In the Iron Age people lived and worked around the edge of the henge. Dere Street, laid out by the Romans about 2,000 years after the ringwork was built, passed through the middle of the enclosure on its way to the town of Cataractonium. Later, in the Anglian period, people were buried around the henge. Then knowledge of this monument appears to have faded and it wasn’t recognised again until 1995 when archaeologists began digging at the southern end of Catterick Racecourse in preparation for quarrying.

Scorton Cursus was discovered from the air in 1949. It was visible as marks in crop and grass that can be traced across the airfield at RAF Scorton and beyond on old air photos. The cursus was up to 2km long and was formed by pairs of outer ditches (the darker cropmarks) and probably a central bank (the paler marks). Archaeologists have excavated small sections of the enclosure but still little is known about this monument. Old maps show that gravel quarrying close to the cursus began in the late 19th century but this increased dramatically in the late 20th century and it has now destroyed approximately three-quarters of the monument.

In 2004 excavations at Marne Barracks, between the runway and taxiway of the former RAF Catterick airfield, revealed a Late Neolithic palisaded enclosure as well as a Neolithic hearth and a Mesolithic knapping floor. The enclosure comprised two concentric circuits of palisade slots and each slot was formed by closely-paired pits. The pits once held timber posts, some of which had been burnt in situ. The enclosure lies just 250 metres to the south-west of Castle Hills, a natural mound which was modified in the 12th century to form a motte and bailey. Some archaeologists have suggested that in the Neolithic period the mound may have been used as a viewing platform during rituals and ceremonies in and around the timber-post enclosure.

Overview of the prehistoric, Roman and Anglian sites and monuments in the Catterick area.
The Hutton Moor and Cana henges are located just a few fields to the west of the A1. In 1775 the Hutton Moor Henge was still on “waste” (unploughed ground), whilst the area of the Cana Henge seems to have been ploughed at that time. This may partly explain why the Hutton Moor enclosure is better preserved. The two henges sit on low hills no more than 2km apart and there are barrows and a possible cursus between and around them.

The three Thornborough Henges are part of a group of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments built on Thornborough Moor, next to the River Ure. The Central Henge was built over part of a cursus that was at least 1.2km long. Archaeological excavations around the henges have also revealed a possible timber post avenue, an oval burial monument and several round barrows. Today all three henges are clearly visible as massive circular banks up to four metres high. These henges once stood on a low promontory overlooking wetlands. Most of the wetlands have been drained and large areas north and west of the henges have been quarried. Some quarry pits have been filled in with household waste, sometimes above the previous ground level.

Nunwick Henge lies between Nunwick Beck and the River Ure and was only discovered in 1951. Unlike the Thornborough Henges this enclosure does not survive as a great earthwork, though the farmer was aware of slight bumps and stoniness at the site. This enclosure has been ploughed over for hundreds of years; traces of possible medieval ridge and furrow can be seen on some air photos. This enclosure can be seen as cropmarks or soilmarks on some air photos and special height measuring technology call LIDAR can reveal the very low remains of the bank.

This historic map, created by Thomas Jefferys in 1775, depicts the Thornborough Henges, then thought to be Roman camps, in their location beside the River Ure. At this time the northern henge lay within the land of Thornborough Common, a location that may have favoured its preservation and reflects the area of former wetland. The henges lie between the medieval settlements of West Tanfield and Thornborough. The roads and trackways linking these two settlements navigate between and around these massive monuments. They were surely a significant element of the local medieval and post medieval cultural and physical landscape.

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 Threats to Prehistoric Landscapes

Sand and gravel extraction around the Thornborough Henges is a relatively recent activity. Mid-19th century maps indicate that limestone extraction and processing was active to the north and west of Nosterfield, but at that time any gravel extraction was on a very small scale. By the mid-20th century gravel pits had been opened within 600m of the Central and South Henges, over an area of approximately 13 hectares. In the later 20th century and first part of this century the focus shifted west and northward towards Nosterfield and Ladybridge. These workings now cover nearly 182 hectares. This activity has contributed to the destruction of tracts of the henge environs and the archaeological resource. It has also provided opportunities for archaeologists to investigate these landscapes more closely.

This unusual feature was an artificial nesting ground for wildfowl. It was formed by rings of water-filled ditches with banks in between them. It was built on one of the last uncultivated areas of Hutton Moor in the 18th century. By the 1950s, as this photo shows, the springs that had fed the ditches had dried up and the area had been ploughed level. With this, one of the last vestiges of the “waste” in which the Hutton Moor Henge had sat for maybe a thousand years was gone, so completing the change in the landscape context of the monument.

The processes of cultivation have had an impact on the survival of earthwork monuments. Approximately one quarter of England is currently under arable cultivation so the potential impact on the overall archaeological resource is highly significant. This photo shows the banks of Cana Henge as pale marks in the bare soil. Once the plough has cut into archaeological deposits they are dispersed, the underlying deposits are then exposed to erosion and the process is repeated with the next ploughing.

In the 1940s Ferrybridge Henge sat amongst arable fields, within a kilometre of the Great North Road and the River Aire. Today it is hemmed in by the power station to the north, the A1(M)/M62 interchange to the west and south and housing development to the east. Much has been learnt about the archaeology of its environs as a consequence of these developments but the visual intrusions are now so overwhelming that the henge has lost its potency and sense of place. Thousands of people drive past this henge every day but most are unaware of its presence.

There are three main management strands implemented through a range of different heritage and non-heritage organisations.

Enhancement of the knowledge base. English Heritage’s National Mapping Programme and smaller-scale surveys including historic map and document analysis, field walking and geophysical survey can all contribute to the baseline historic environment data.

Promoting awareness and good practice. Using the baseline data, heritage bodies including English Heritage, local authorities and Natural England can inform land owners and users about the archaeological potential of their land and the possible impacts of their activities. They may propose appropriate mitigation or suggest good practice. Where destruction is inevitable for example by quarrying or development, then higher level archaeological investigations including excavation may be advised. To avoid further degradation by arable cultivation, archaeologically sensitive agricultural land may be taken into the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, which promotes less detrimental regimes through voluntary agreements. Awareness of some important historic landscapes is signposted by their inclusion on the lists of Registered Battlefields and Registered Parks and Gardens.

Statutory Protection. Scheduled Monument or Listed Building protection is afforded to a relatively small proportion of the known archaeological and historical archaeological sites and monuments. It places strict controls on activities within the protected areas or structures and can also have a bearing on what change is permitted in the wider setting of the protected monument or building.
This map of the environs of the Hutton Moor and Cana henges demonstrates the spatial relationship between the features identified from the National Mapping Programme’s work from air photos and the National Monuments Record monuments, land that is in the Environmental Stewardship scheme and those monuments and buildings that have statutory protection.

Useful Resources

- Discover England’s archaeological and architectural heritage with http://www.pastscape.org.uk/
- Find out about English Heritage’s National Mapping Programme http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/research/landscapes-and-areas/national-mapping-programme/
- Read about investigations at the Thornborough Henges http://thornborough.ncl.ac.uk
- Find out about listing and designation http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/caring/listing/
- Read more about English Heritage’s work in Yorkshire and the Humber region http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about/working-locally/yorkshire-humberside/

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