

## JOHN ROBERT MORTIMER 1825-1911 A PIONEERING ARCHAEOLOGIST



John Robert Mortimer was born at Fimber in 1825. He lived in this small rural community until 1869, when he moved to the nearby market town of Driffield, and from where he was to play out the rest of his life. He died in 1911 and was buried in the town's Bridlington Road Cemetery.

A corn merchant by trade, Mortimer is best remembered as a pioneering archaeologist, who, despite his humble origins, made a nationally important contribution to the development of modern British archaeology. He devoted much of his adult life to the systematic and careful examination of around 420 prehistoric burial mounds, as well as other archaeological features, on the Yorkshire Wolds, eventually becoming a nationally recognised authority on the subject.

Mortimer was born into a world in which archaeology was not a defined subject and had yet to capture the public imagination. By the time of his death in 1911 archaeology was well on the way to becoming a recognised area of study. Through his high standards, meticulous excavation and recordings Mortimer helped to lay some of the foundations on which the subject came to be based. He can rightly take his place as one of the founding fathers of modern day archaeology.

Mortimer's archaeological work culminated in 1905 with the publication of *Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire*. This magnificent book, with over 1000 artefact illustrations, established Mortimer's reputation as one of the most important British archaeologists of the later nineteenth century



## A Circular Ramble around Mortimer's Fimber



## A 2.5 mile walk around the parish of Fimber to observe the archeological features studied by Mortimer who was born here in 1825

Text taken from  
**JOHN ROBERT MORTIMER**  
*The Life of a Nineteenth Century  
East Yorkshire Archaeologist*  
by Stephen Harrison.

Although they may well have been used as routeways, it is now known that they were single-ditched linear earthworks and date to the same period as these features

'In a wild and wooded district these narrow sunk-tways would be safe and sure guides by day and by night to a rude settlement, to which they undoubtedly lead. They would also protect the primitive settlers against sudden attacks of the wild and ferocious animals of that period, which would not choose to enter these narrow trenches. They would likewise assist the hunter to approach unobserved, any animal in the vicinity, he wished to capture; and any large game he might surprise and force into these narrow and deep trenches would have great difficulty in extricating itself, and might be readily driven along the ditches into the central and inhabited enclosure, where its capture would be more easily accomplished. Lastly, they unquestionably denote the fixed settlements of a rude and primitive commune in pre-historic times, earlier even... than the period of double dykes (entrenchments), of which, let me remark, there is no written or oral history, and whose use is entirely forgotten.'

Mortimer defined these as 'covered ways connected with and leading to primitive settlements'. He painted a picture of how the 'hollow-ways' might have been used:

Modern research has shown that the linear earthworks are not all of the same date, but were constructed and added to at various times from the Middle Bronze Age into the Roman period (that is from about 1400BC to around the 1st and 2nd centuries AD). Mortimer correctly identified these as ancient land divisions, serving as 'enclosures for family or even tribal boundaries and tribal settlement'. He was of the opinion that they were the works of a settled community who spared no amount of labour to enclose their pasture- and probably, to some extent, tillage- lands, and to protect their homes and herds by the most substantial boundaries and ways of communication then known', and also that they might have been constructed to control access to water supplies.

### Ancient Entrenchments

### Hollow-ways

### Habitatation Terraces

Mortimer wrote that these were

'(Quite distinct from any other form of earth-works, and where they remain perfect in outline are remarkably alike in shape and size. They are unlike the garden terraces, being generally found away from the immediate sites of old villages, and are mostly on that side of the valley which faces the morning or the mid-day sun, at about one third the distance from the foot of the slope. And are parallel with the course of the valley. They occur in some cases as single platforms, in others as double platforms, whilst sometimes there are three, or even more terraces, running parallel one above another. One end of each terrace is always of full width, while the other end runs out to a fine point; and it is also worthy of note, that when two or more are found arranged like steps, one above the other, they invariably have their wide ends in the same direction. When well preserved, they are found to have a breadth varying from 15 to 21 feet, and a length of 100 to 200 yards.'

Modern archaeologists now see these as artificial terraces (known as lynchets) for the growing of crops, and can date from prehistoric times right up to the medieval period.

### Cultivation Terraces

Mortimer described these as:

'Quite distinct from the Habitation Terraces... (and)... are parallel strips of land of varying lengths, one above another, on hill slopes and in the vicinity of old villages. They usually run parallel with the hill sides... They owe their existence to the action of the plough, which has removed the soil from the upper to the lower side of each strip of land, eventually producing a ledge with a steep bank on its upper side. These terraces were once bounded by fences, as shown by very old ash and other trees in places standing at irregular distances along their margins.'

These, as Mortimer suggested are terraces (known as lynchets) for the growing of crops, and can be of any date between prehistory and the medieval period.

Further information on the life and work of Mortimer can be seen in the permanent exhibition located in St Mary's Church, Fimber.



Mortimer had a lifelong attachment to the place of his birth. His strongly felt sense of belonging is reflected in his repeated investigations into Fimber's prehistoric past. His archeological work in the township was conducted intermittently over a 50-year period, and involved field walking, survey, and excavation.

Many of the sites he explored are now destroyed at ground level and can only be seen as crop marks and soil stains on aerial photographs. His work was important in bringing together a large body of data, which would otherwise would have disappeared without trace, and which has provided the starting point for more recent investigations.

This self-guided walk highlights Mortimer's investigations into a series of pre-historic earthworks around the village, some of which are still visible in today's landscape. He divided these earthworks into four types: 'ancient entrenchments', now known as Linear Earthworks; 'hollow-ways', 'hollow-ways' or 'ancient sunken roads'; 'habitation terraces'; and 'cultivation terraces'.

"Few pursuits can be more fascinating than enquiring into the history of past ages, tracing out the manners and customs of mankind in early times, investigating their origin and antiquity, and following the rise and progress of bygone races. But when these explorations are conducted on our native soils, more especially near the cherished spot which gave us birth, and in which are present joys and future hopes- as to this life- are chiefly centred, they then acquire the deepest interest and become invested with a special charm and value"

J.R.Mortimer,

Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire, p.xii

## 1. Wandale

A complex series of well-preserved, multi-period single and multiple ditch and bank linear earthworks running along and down the valley sides; constructed piecemeal over a considerable period of time probably between the Middle Bronze Age and the coming of the Romans.



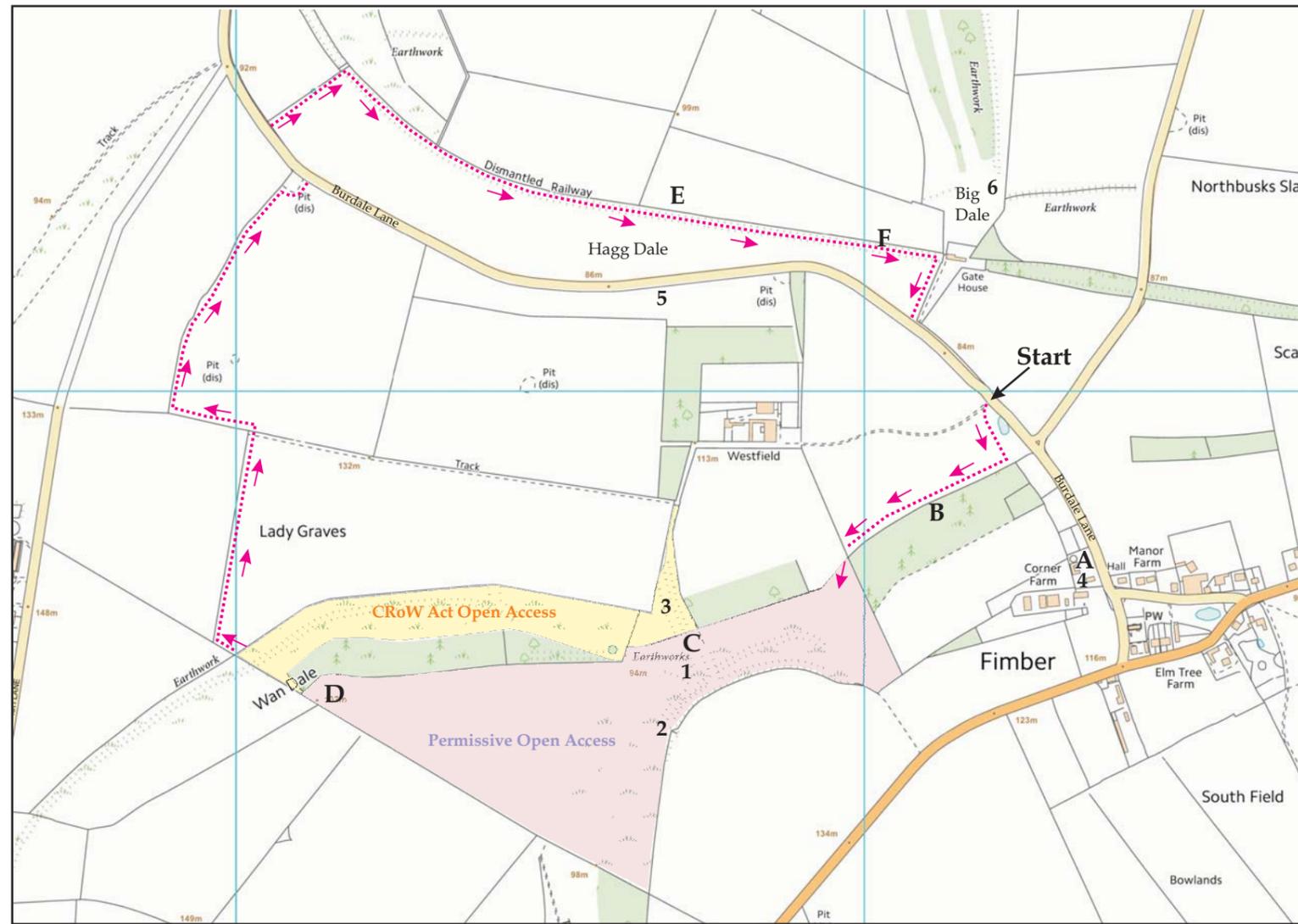
Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



## 2. West End Farm

Mortimer's birthplace, a small 120 acre farm owned by his grandfather John Welburn, was the last property on the left as you leave the village along Burdale Lane. Mortimer lived here until 1869, when he moved to Driffield following his marriage to Matilda Mitchell. Most of the house was demolished in the earlier 20th century and replaced by what we see today, the property known as The Gables.

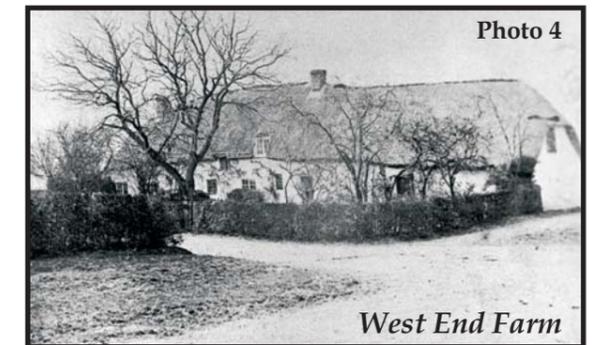


Photo 4

West End Farm

## 3. Haggdale Cliff

A stretch of multiple linear earthworks running down the valley side and crossing the valley floor (where it can only be seen on aerial photographs as a crop mark or soil stain) and re-appearing as an earthwork in Big Dale. This is part of the same system seen in Wandale, and originally formed a complete circuit around Fimber (see Mortimer's plan on the other side of this leaflet). There is also a single linear earthwork (one of Mortimer's 'hollow-ways') running along and midway up the valley side, parallel to Burdale Lane.



Haggdale Cliff

Photo 5

## MORTIMER WALK DESCRIPTION AND DIRECTIONS

A short 2.5 mile self-guided walk along the permissive path around Westfield Farm, taking in some of the key archeological sites. The route is mainly over rough grassland with two short, steep climbs: stout footwear is recommended. Livestock may be grazing; dogs should be kept under close control. Permissive Access and CRoW Act Open Access enable closer inspection of the earthworks in Wandale and Big Dale.

1. Cars can be parked in Fimber village. Head west to Burdale Lane and the site of Mortimer's birthplace at West End Farm (Point A), now a 20th century property known as The Gables.
2. Continue down the steep Burdale Lane for approximately 200m and at the sign for Westfield Farm circle left around a tree lined pond and immediately turn sharp right to walk alongside a wooded plantation (Point B).
3. After about 200m pass through a kissing gate into the wide valley floor of Wandale. Under the CRoW Act walkers can roam freely over the valley floor and sides, at their own risk. At Point C explore the complex of well preserved earthworks running along and down the valley sides.
4. Continue forwards taking the right hand valley bottom past a small dew pond on the right and a plantation on the left. After a further 300m reach a wire fence (Point D). At this point either climb the steep sided slope to the right to reach a kissing gate at the top: or take a slightly easier climb diagonally some 50m back from the fence, near to an old chalk pit.
5. Pass through the kissing gate to bear right along a straight track with a hedgerow on the left and an arable field on the right. This area is known as 'Lady Graves'. From here there are extensive views to Fimber village and the surrounding post- enclosure farmsteads in Burdale.
6. At the end of the straight turn sharp left to walk alongside the hedgerow to the right and after about 100m turn right through a gap in the hedge and continue down the steep graded field boundary to the road.
7. Turn left along the road for about 50m before passing through a kissing gate on the right and continue for a further 50m to the former Driffield to Malton railway line. Turn right to walk along the railway line towards Fimber. From the railway embankment at Point E view the stretch of multiple linear earthworks including the hollow way running along and midway up the valley side parallel to Burdale Lane.
8. At Point F view the multiple earthworks on Big Dale. On reaching the boundary of the former railway crossing Gatehouse, turn right along the farm track, to a kissing gate in Burdale Lane. From here, turn left and walk back up the road to Fimber village and the end of the walk.

## 3. Big Dale

The multiple earthworks seen at Haggdale Cliff reappears here as an up-standing feature on the valley floor and the west-facing valley side. To the east, on the wold top, these earthworks have been ploughed out since Mortimer's day but can still be traced as crop marks or soil stains on aerial photographs.



Photo 6

Big Dale