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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF HOLY ISLAND

Holy Island is a small tidal island lying off the north-east coast of Northumberland. It is best known as the site of the major Anglo-Saxon monastery founded by Oswald in AD 635. For the first three decades of its existence it acted as a focus of the Irish school of Christianity in the kingdom. However, it weathered the impact of the Synod of Whitby in AD 664, and retained its significance as a key ecclesiastical centre becoming a focus for the cult of St Cuthbert. It is in connection with the establishment of his cult that the Lindisfarne Gospels were probably created. The island suffered one of the earliest Viking attacks on Britain in AD 793. It remained a magnet for Viking raids and in AD 875 the relics of Cuthbert and much of the monastic community began their peregrinations that took them first to nearby Norham, and thence southwards before finally resting at Durham in AD 995. This is traditionally seen as the end of the Anglo-Saxon monastic establishment on the island. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that there was a continued ecclesiastical presence on the island into the tenth century.



Figure 1: Holy Island Priory viewed from the east (Photograph: David Petts)

The core of the early medieval monastic site almost certainly underlies the post-Conquest priory . These picturesque ruins saw two phases of clearance and basic archaeological recording at the end

of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century (Crossman 1890; Peers 1923–4). This work revealed the bulk of the substantial collection of early medieval sculpture from the island, and which act as confirmation of the proximity of the focus of Anglo-Saxon activity. This sculpture mainly dates from the eighth and ninth century, but there is a significant proportion of stones which seem to post-date AD 875 emphasizing the survival of church activity on the island. The later Romanesque priory church and the parish church of St Mary are aligned on the same west-east axis. Whilst there is little or no surviving Anglo-Saxon fabric in either structure, this spatial arrangement arguably maintains the linear alignment of churches, so typical of Anglo-Saxon church groups (Blair 1991).

Following the clearance work on the Priory, there was no serious archaeological investigation on the island until 1962, when Brian Hope-Taylor, fresh from his excavations at Yeavinger, carried out a number of interventions on the island. This included three trenches in the field to the west of the parish church. They revealed significant post-Conquest medieval activity, acting as a reminder of the extent to which the layout of Holy Island village has changed. Beneath this later medieval activity was at least one ditch belonging to a pre-ceramic horizon, which has the potential to be related to Anglo-Saxon monastic activity (although a Roman Iron Age or even earlier date should not be dismissed). Hope-Taylor also excavated a series of trenches along The Heugh, the raised whinstone ridge which stands to the immediate south of the Priory complex. Again, he discovered post-Conquest occupation butting up against the stone ridge. He also excavated the remains of a west-east aligned turf and rubble structure on the crest of the Heugh. This also seems to have belonged to the preceramic horizon on the island. Although Hope-Taylor suggested it was a church on the basis of its alignment, the spatial arrangement of the structure is more likely to simply reflect the underlying grain of the Heugh itself. Nonetheless, it is a strong candidate as belonging to the Anglo-Saxon phase of the monastery.

Other early medieval activity on the Heugh itself was identified by archaeological work by the University of Leicester in the 1980s that excavated a midden deposit at its eastern end. The excavation of this midden was part of a much larger project on the island carried out by Rob Young and Deirdre O'Sullivan in the late 1980s and early 1990s and following on from an excavation on the site of the English Heritage visitor centre by O'Sullivan (Beavitt et al. 1987; O'Sullivan 1985). This had identified ephemeral traces of early medieval activity, although this was hard to interpret. The most important element of this project was the excavation of the early medieval farmstead of Green Shiel which lies on the northern side of the island (O'Sullivan and Young 1991). This had been first identified as an archaeological site when part of it was exposed during construction for a light railway provided to support the quarrying industry on the north side of the island (Selby Donaldson 1845). It provided evidence for a range of agricultural activities and dated mainly to the tenth century AD. Of particular importance was the discovery of a substantial faunal assemblage dominated by calf-bones. It is possible that these represent the preferential slaughter of young cattle for parchment manufacture, although there are other explanations.

More recently, there have been a number of archaeological excavations on the island carried out as part of the planning system. Work on the site of the Lindisfarne Winery revealed probable early medieval activity, including a number of ditches and pits and an early medieval comb, as well as hints of Neolithic activity. Further north, at Castle View Gardens, small excavations identified evidence for at least one wattle-and-daub structure of possible Anglo-Saxon date, which appears to

have been destroyed by burning. However, the archives and records of this important discovery have gone astray leaving this potentially significant site very difficult to interpret.

In 2012, a new phase of work began on the Island with a major campaign of geophysical survey by Durham University around the village (see Petts 2013). This identified a series of new features. To the east of the village, the survey identified a second cloister belonging to the Priory, probably functioning as a hospital cloister as it lies adjacent to the monastic infirmary. To the east and aligned on the Priory church are another group of indistinct linear features. This may be of an early date, but could equally be related to a major phase of sixteenth-century military activity on the island. To the west of the village, a number of early fields or enclosures could be seen, as well as a possible early boundary for the monastery (O'Sullivan 1989). It also showed that Marygate, which has been suggested as maintaining the alignment of an early monastic *vallum*, once ran westwards down to the edge of the island, where it met a now unused track across the sands towards the mainland. This connected the village with Fenham, which in the medieval period was the focal centre of the estates held by the monastery. These formed a block of land running from Fenham up to the Tweed, and was known as Islandshire.

An on-going programme of 'walk-over' surveys is continuing to add to the known archaeological resource on the island. An indistinct carving on a boulder beneath Lindisfarne Castle has now been probably confirmed as a pre-Conquest incised cross symbol. A number of small shell middens, probably of medieval date, have been located, and initial work in the sand-dunes at the western end of the island has served to identify and record a range of features ranging from possible medieval land surfaces surviving extant beneath the dunes to the foundations of a deserted twentieth-century lifeboat station. These latter remains are reminder that there is far more to the historic environment than the traces of the Anglo-Saxon monastery; it was the site of an important medieval priory and village, a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century military strong point. There is also important industrial archaeology surviving relating to limestone quarrying and burning and the small fishing industry. Although this new phase of fieldwork on the island is at an early stage, it is clear that there is still much to do for the project team.