

EXPANDING THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF HOLY ISLAND (LINDISFARNE)

David Petts (University of Durham)

LINDISFARNE (NU 1266 4212). The Anglo-Saxon monastery of Lindisfarne is of great significance to the history and archaeology of early medieval Britain. Founded in AD 635 by Oswald, King of Northumbria, it had close connections with St Columba's great monastery of Iona in W Scotland. Following the death of abbot Cuthbert in the later 7th century, Lindisfarne became an important cult centre and Cuthbert's relics were translated into a shrine in AD 698, an event which may have been the stimulus for the production of the Lindisfarne Gospels. It was subsequently the first monastic house in Britain to be subject to Viking raids in the late 8th century and the increasing regularity of these raids culminated in the community leaving the island, finally re-establishing itself at Durham after a series of interim resting places.

Despite this importance, the island has seen relatively little recent archaeological research. While a major campaign of investigation by the University of Leicester took place in the 1980s and early 1990s, revealing much important information about early medieval activity elsewhere on the island (particularly the pre-Conquest agricultural settlement at Green Shiel) (O'Sullivan and Young 1991a, 1991b), it yielded little about the topography of the early monastery itself. Excavation close to the Priory in advance of a visitor centre revealed few early medieval features (O'Sullivan 1985), and geophysical survey east of the Priory church, although identifying a number of possible features, located nothing diagnostically pre-Conquest (Beavitt *et al* 1988, 14). Deirdre O'Sullivan has postulated that the monastic *vallum* (boundary ditch) marking the boundary between sacred and profane space may have run along Marygate before turning south towards the W end of the Heugh (O'Sullivan 1989, 140; 2001).

Although this alignment is certainly a contender for the course of the *vallum*, it was predicated on the assumption that the present street layout of the village preserves earlier spatial divisions, with their origins in the early medieval period, and that there have not been any major phases of re-planning in the historic core of Holy Island Village. This assumption had been increasingly open to challenge as more work has been carried out on the 16th-century construction and defence of the island, when it was used as a military supply base. Some features of the street plan, such as the unusual angle of Prior Lane, have been suggested as being connected to a re-organisation of the village roads at this time, with attention being drawn to the similarity between the angle made by the intersection of Prior Lane and Fiddler's Green and angled-bastions found in early post-medieval defensive systems (Hardie and NAA 2001, 210).

In 2012 a new project was initiated by the Department of Archaeology, Durham University, to re-examine the archaeology of the island. This has involved archival work and a new campaign of major geophysical survey and other small scale fieldwork, whose results are reported here.

Geophysical Survey

Although the Leicester University research had included geophysical survey in 1982, this had been limited in scale, as was more recent survey work by GSB Propection. Advances in geophysical techniques undoubtedly make it worthwhile re-initiating such survey work, and accordingly in September 2012 a 20ha magnetometer survey was carried out in and around Holy Island village (Figs.1-2). This targetted three areas in particular: (1) Sanctuary Close, lying east of the medieval

priory ruins and the site of the earlier surveys; (2) an area to the west of the parish church, including the site of Brian Hope-Taylor's 1962 excavations; and (3) ground around St Coomb's Farm to the north of the village, which was one candidate for the site of the St Columba's churchyard which was documented on the island in the 16th century (O'Sullivan 1989, 140).

The most significant feature recorded in Sanctuary Close (Area 12) was a large quadrangular stone structure immediately south-east of the priory's *hospitium*. In form, it resembles a cloister, but it is unlikely to be the main cloister of the Priory, which survives in a ruinous state to the south of the priory church. However, given its proximity to the *hospitium* it may well be an infirmary cloister, comparable to examples known at Rievaulx, Canterbury and Norwich (Fergusson and Harrison 1999, 117; Sparks 2007, 33-4; Gilchrist 2005, 173-4).

Other Area 12 features lie mainly between the E end of the priory church and the W edge of the adjacent raised beach: two possible rectangular structures are traced, one aligned roughly SW-NE and another broadly W-E (Fig.2); the latter lies due east of the priory church and on the same alignment of both this and the parish church. John Blair has previously drawn attention to the alignment of these two structures and suggested that they reflected the arrangement of two of the Anglo-Saxon churches within the monastery (Blair 1991). While the linear arrangement is certainly intriguing, we cannot exclude that some of these features may relate to 16th-century fortifications recorded for this area – although it is not clear whether these were ever built (Hardie and Rushton 2000, 80-81). Various probable soil-filled ditches and a probable former track were also detected in Sanctuary Close.

In the second magnetometer zone west of the parish church, the precise locations of Hope-Taylor's trenches (see below) were not identified. However, it was apparent that the alignments of both Marygate and Prior Lane continued westwards towards the coastline (Fig.2). It is probable that Marygate extended this far west until at least the later 18th century and Armstrong's mid-19th-century map of the island clearly shows a causeway from Fenwick on the mainland running directly to this point. Presumably, once the causeway fell out of use, the road became blocked by 19th-century buildings. Small possible field boundaries or paddocks lie either side of this westward extension. Meanwhile, to the south of the continuation of Prior Lane a clear increase in substantial magnetic anomalies is evident; while this may merely be caused by intrusive igneous geological debris, it could also indicate industrial activity.

The results from this second area do nothing to disprove O'Sullivan's suggested monastic boundary along the course of Marygate. However, they do suggest that Prior Lane and its extension form an alternative or additional *vallum*. Crucially, as both boundaries lie beneath modern paddocks, there is scope for future targeted excavation to test this hypothesis.

Finally, the magnetometer survey identified no evidence around St Coomb's Farm that was indicative of a church or of cemeterial use. However, a small enclosure was revealed standing on the edge of the raised beach north-east of the village, which has broad morphological parallels with Iron Age and Roman enclosures recorded on the mainland in N Northumberland.

Hope-Taylor on Holy Island

Preliminary work has begun on analysing the archives from Brian Hope-Taylor's 1962 interventions which are held in the RCAHMS, Edinburgh. These report that he dug three trenches to the west of the parish church, yielding evidence mainly for medieval occupation. But these also showed that at least one substantial ditch ran W-E across the field towards the beach. This would have been broadly parallel to the extensions of Prior Lane and Marygate. He dug other features along the Heugh to the south of the village, which again included clearly later medieval occupation, plus at least one structure which, devoid of ceramic artefacts, has the potential to be earlier in date. In the absence of surviving finds, it is necessary to rely on Hope-Taylor's dating of the pottery from his excavations.

However, his plans and sections, as was typical of his work, are immaculate and digital copies of the drawings plans are being obtained to allow the precise plotting of these features.

Development-led Archaeology

A number of excavations on the island have been carried out in the context of the planning system. Excavations by Northern Archaeological Associates on the site of the Lindisfarne Winery in 2000 revealed a set of features that appear to pre-date the 12th-century ceramic horizon on the island (NAA 2001). One of these produced a bone comb of early medieval type. At Castle View Garden to the north of Marygate, excavation in advance of the construction of housing in 2007 (IFA 2007) traced early medieval features, including a substantial section of wattle walling; however, while there is a short interim publication, the archives from this project are yet to be located.

Other fieldwork

In addition to the geophysical survey, a new walkover survey of the island was carried out. This identified, for example, the sites of a number of possible small shell-middens eroding out of the shoreline; most were inaccessible, but one, lying on the edge of the raised beach, to the east of the Priory, was recorded and sampled (with fully analysis pending) (Fig.3). These features could potentially date to as early as the Mesolithic, but may equally represent medieval or post-medieval utilisation of the ample maritime resources hereabouts. Various possible features were also identified lying within the sand-dunes that dominate most of the west of the island, including a small rectangular enclosure of unknown date. At least one other rectangular enclosure has been identified along the Snook on aerial photographic coverage, but requires investigation on the ground. More generally, the presence of industrial remains, a 19th-century shieling and a pre-WWII lifeboat house surviving within the dune systems are reminders of the excellent survival of the post-medieval historic environment on the island.

Conclusions

This initial phase of renewed research on Lindisfarne has successfully identified a series of possible boundary features that may relate to the early medieval monastery. These have been supplemented by the insights that can be gleaned from limited yet important development-driven archaeology being carried out on the island. Further research on the island is essential and current plans include a higher resolution resistivity survey of the features identified to the east of the Priory and Ground Penetrating Radar survey within the boundaries of the later Priory. Small-scale targeted excavation of the boundary features to the west of the village would also be of value. Combined with continued archive work it is anticipated that this research will generate a much enhanced understanding of the archaeology of Holy Island.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank National Geographic for funding the geophysical survey. Particular thanks are also due to the landowners, the Crossman Estate, and the tenant farmers for allowing access to the land. The fieldwork was carried out by David Petts, Brian Buchanan, Andy Platell, Richie Villis and Nathan Thomas of Archaeological Services Durham University.

References

- Beavitt, P, O'Sullivan, D and Young, R 1988, *Archaeology on Lindisfarne: Fieldwork and Research 1983-88*, University of Leicester, Department of Archaeology.
- Beavitt, P, O'Sullivan, D and Young, R 1990, 'Fieldwork on Lindisfarne, Northumberland, 1980-1988', *Northern Archaeol* **8**, 1987 (1990) 1-23.
- Blair, J 1991, 'The early churches at Lindisfarne', *Archaeologia Aeliana* (5th series) **19**, 47-54

- Fergusson, P. and Harrison, S. 1999, *Rievaulx Abbey: Community, architecture, memory* Yale: Yale University Press
- Gilchrist, R 2005, *Norwich Cathedral Close: the evolution of the English cathedral landscape* Woodbridge: Boydell
- Hardie, C and Northern Archaeological Associates, 2001, 'Fun at the Palace', *Archaeology in Northumberland 2000-2001* **10**, 20-21.
- Hardie, C and Rushton, S 2000, *The Tides of Time: Archaeology on the Northumberland Coast* Morpeth: Northumberland County Council.
- Ian Farmer Associates 2007, *Castle View, Holy Island, Berwick-Upon-Tweed, Northumberland TD15 2SG*. Unpublished data structure report, Contract No 11011.
- Northern Archaeological Associates 2001, *The Winery & Village Hall, Holy Island: Archaeological Post-Excavation Assessment* NAA report **01/4**.
- O'Sullivan, D 2001, 'Space, silence and shortage on Lindisfarne: the archaeology of asceticism' in A. MacGregor and H. Hamerow (eds), *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Britain: Essays in Honour of Rosemary Cramp*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 33-52.
- O'Sullivan, D and Young, R 1991, 'The early medieval settlement at Green Shiel, Lindisfarne: an interim report on the excavations, 1984-91', *Archaeology North* **2**, 17-21.
- O'Sullivan, D and Young, R 1991, 'The early medieval settlement at Green Shiel, Northumberland', *Archaeologia Aeliana* (5th series) **19**, 55-69.
- O'Sullivan, D 1985, 'An excavation in Holy Island village, 1977', *Archaeologia Aeliana* (5th series) **13**, 27-116.
- O'Sullivan, D 1989, 'The plan of the early Christian monastery on Lindisfarne', in G Bonner, D Rollason and C Stancliffe (eds), *St Cuthbert: His Cult and Community*, Woodbridge: Boydell 125-142.
- Sparks, M 2007, *Canterbury Cathedral Precincts: A historical survey* Canterbury: Dean and Chapter of Canterbury

Figure 1. Plot of magnetometer survey carried out in 2012 © Archaeological Services Durham University

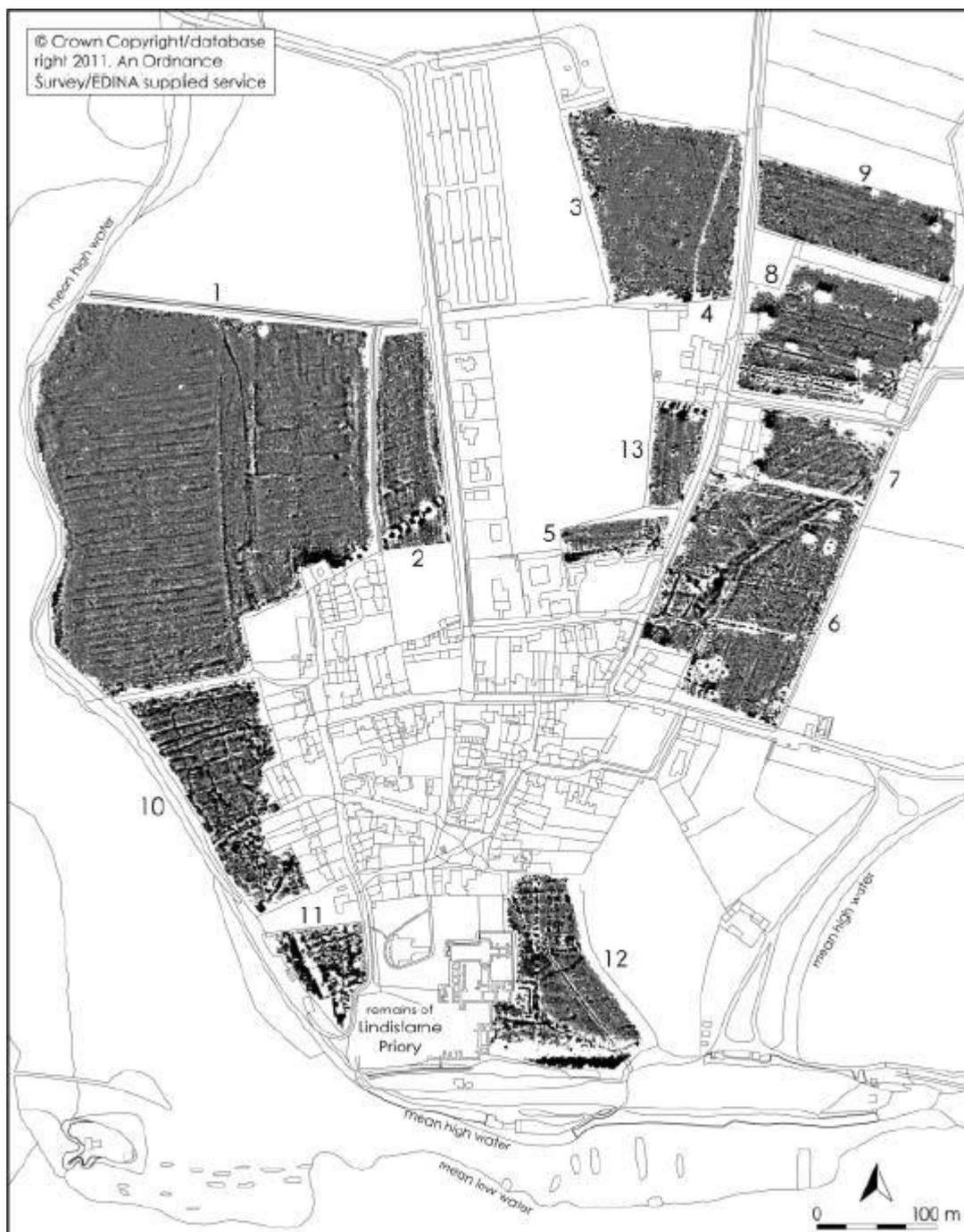


Figure 2. Interpretative plan of survey results. A: structures to the east of the Priory church. B: westwards extension of Prior Lane. C: westwards extension of Marygate D: possible Iron Age or Romano-British enclosure. © Archaeological Services Durham University



Figure 3: Shell midden eroding from edge of raised beach to the east of the Priory

