

Excavations at St Wilfred's Monastery Site, Ripon

In a previous issue of *Interim* I summarized the results of York Archaeological Trust's 1986-7 excavations at Ailcy Hill, 200m due east of St Wilfrid's monastic church at Ripon, the forerunner of Ripon Cathedral. We demonstrated that the Hill is a natural feature, utilized for burial in the 6th-9th centuries - perhaps predating, and certainly contemporary with, the monastery. Here I will attempt to place this cemetery in the wider context of the early church at Ripon. To do this I will draw upon references by antiquarian writers, most of them locally based and writing in the 19th or early 20th century, who recorded useful, fascinating and tantalizing snippets of information about what they saw or what had been uncovered in the vicinity of the Cathedral. I will also summarize work which Mark Whyman and I have been engaged upon, for English Heritage, in analysing and collating the records of three previous excavations at Ripon.

The first of these was directed by Tony Baggs in 1955 to the west of St Marygate, where a clutch of clergy cottages was subsequently built. Baggs uncovered the foundation of a two-cell stone structure interpreted as a church or chapel, with east-west aligned burials inside and outside, some of them stratigraphically pre-dating the building. A few of the burials were accompanied by antler combs, some of them with bone comb-cases, of types characteristic of the 9th-11th centuries. Additionally, a few small fragments of decorated stone crosses were recovered, and Dominic Tweddle has dated these to c. AD 800

In c. 1540 the antiquarian John Leland recorded the presence hereabouts of '*a Chapelle of our Lady in a Botom one close distant by ... from the new Minstre. One Marmaduke [Huby] .. Abbate of Fountains [c. 1500] obtained this Chapell ... and pullid down the East End of it, a pece of exceding auncient Wark, and buildid a fair pece of new Werk with squarid stones for it, leving the Weste Ende of very old Werk standing ... One thing I much notid, that was 3. Crossis standing in a row at the East Ende of the Chapelle Garth. They were things antiquissimi operis*' [of the oldest workmanship].

Medieval records indicate that there was a chantry on the site from 15th February 1392, and a reference of 1478 indicates that the chapel then had a nave and chancel. It is not

clear when it was taken down, but there is no reference to it in Thomas Gent's *History of the Loyal Town of Rippon* published in 1733.

It seems that what Baggs uncovered was the foundations of the Lady Chapel; but what is exciting is the indication of pre-Norman ecclesiastical use provided by the graves with combs/cases. Whether or not the excavated cross-fragments dated c.800 are parts of Leland's *crosses of most ancient workmanship* is a matter for speculation - but if they are, this site's use is pushed back from the Anglo-Scandinavian period to the Anglian period, before the Scandinavian settlement of Yorkshire.

Additionally, there are other tantalizing indications about the date and extent of this cemetery. Excavations directed by Phil Mayes in 1974 on two sites to the east of Marygate, where a row of houses now stands, included a trench more or less opposite the 1955 excavation. In it he revealed east-west human burials, although none with accompanying grave goods, and thus essentially undated. Nonetheless, this may be more of the same cemetery, later bisected by St Marygate. Furthermore, it was beneath St Marygate, some time in the mid 19th century, that workmen digging a drain exposed several human skeletons. Close by was an inscribed stone, likened in a contemporary (but, sadly, undated) newspaper cutting to Anglo-Saxon gravestones like those found at Hartlepool in the 1830s and early 1840s. I suggest that this stone may well have been the one which The Yorkshire Philosophical Society bought from a Mr H Sharpin of Ripon in 1872, and which is now in the Yorkshire Museum. This bears the inscription +ADH [Y]SE [PR]B, meaning + Adhyse the priest, and is possibly dated to the 8th-9th centuries. Like the Lady Chapel fragments, this stone may have been moved from its original position, but it is another piece of circumstantial evidence for a pre-Viking graveyard hereabouts.

The third hitherto unpublished excavation is one directed by David Hindhaugh in 1976 to the north of the cathedral, alongside what is now the Old Deanery Hotel and Restaurant, in the vicinity where a single house was quite recently erected. Most of the structural remains uncovered were dated to the medieval period (12th-14th centuries), but in one corner of the excavation, below these remains, there was a short length of what can be interpreted as a timber slot, the trench dug to hold the wall of a timber building. Such slots have been identified in excavations at the pre-Viking Anglo-Saxon monastery at

Hartlepool; there, the timber buildings seem to have been replaced by stone structures, and it is possible that this sequence was repeated at Ripon. Apart from their stratigraphic position, and their internal characteristics, the only dating for these features was the single object found associated with them. This was the gold, garnet and amber cloisonné roundel known as the Ripon Jewel. An article devoted to this item appears in Interim Volume 21 No. 1, and here it is sufficient to say that it may well date to the time of St Wilfrid (he died in 709/10), and is probably part of the decoration of an ornate piece of church equipment such as a cross, a book cover or a reliquary casket. It suggests that the timber slot could indeed be of Anglo-Saxon date, and represent a monastic building.

Slightly further north-east of the cathedral is a site recorded on various 18th and 19th century maps and antiquarian sources as 'Site of the Scotch Monastery' or some such name. This name is taken to be a reference to the original monastery of Celtic monks founded at Ripon just a few years before St Wilfrid was given the site. Whether there is any concrete reason for the name being given to this particular vicinity is unknown. There are, however, tantalizing antiquarian references to discoveries made here. Gent's map of 1733 refers to the site as 'now a hill ... where foundation stones have been found', and a 19th century source, more explicit, mentions the recovery, from a mound of gravel, of Early English (ie 13th century) architectural fragments, and also 9th century coins (*stycas*). The mound was levelled by Dean Waddilove in the early 19th century; the site, defined by surrounding streets as a half oval in shape is now occupied by a home for the elderly. The former presence of the gravel mound alone may account for the street layout, but alternatively there is room to speculate that originally there may have been a full oval enclosure here; and circular or oval enclosures were a favoured shape for Celtic monastic precincts.

Nearby is yet another vicinity with interesting connotations. All Hallows Hill and Allhallowgate are noted by antiquarian writers as locations where a large number of human burials have been unearthed, many of them during gravel quarrying which has considerably altered the natural topography hereabouts. The burials are undated, and there is no known church or churchyard of All Hallows/All Saints associated with the area, in spite of its name. Conjecture suggests that there may have been an early church in the vicinity, which acted as a focus for these burials; and such a hypothetical church might

have originated as part of the monastic precinct.

All of this suggests that there may have been an extensive monastic precinct to the north and east of what is now the Cathedral church (and who knows what is to the south and west). Indeed, the first definition of an ecclesiastical building in Ripon, in 1228, indicates that Ailcy Hill and Priest Lane formed at least part of the perimeter.

The possibility that Wilfrid's monastery covered an extensive area, with burials and buildings disposed in a variety of foci throughout, should therefore inform future attitudes to land use in the area. The site offers marvellous opportunities to learn about an early Northumbrian monastery of the first rank. Yet can we even be sure that present, seemingly innocuous land use, such as gardening, the planting of trees etc are not likely to damage important archaeological remains? It would be relatively simple to find out whether there are indeed significant archaeological remains throughout the area which incorporates the sites discussed above, and to determine the current status of preservation; this seems an important next step in increasing our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon monastery at Ripon.

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