

## Appleby Archaeology February 2011

Appleby Archaeology group welcomed Jan Walker from the West Cumbria Archaeological Society to their February meeting. Jan has been closely involved in the excavation of Holm Cultram Abbey and she talked on the history of the abbey, the archaeological investigations and the Society's future plans for the site.

The site of Holm Cultram Abbey lies on the Wigton to Siloth road at Abbeytown. The abbey which was the largest monastic house in Cumbria was founded by Prince Henry, son of David I of Scotland. The monks, who established the monastery, were Cistercian from Melrose Abbey as at that time much of present day Cumbria was under Scottish control although shortly after, in 1157 the land was reclaimed as English by Henry II.

The monks organised the clearing of forests and the draining of surrounding marshes, making the land of the Holm district habitable and profitable. They were successful sheep farmers and producers of salt. In the latter part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century they had property across the country as far afield as Newcastle. The Abbey was at the height of its influence in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and because of its wealth it was often raided by the Scots. The early 14<sup>th</sup> century saw the abbey land laid waste with the worst raid in 1319 by Robert the Bruce, despite the fact that his father's heart was reportedly buried there. Edward I was a regular visitor and spent the night before his death in the abbey. It was recorded that that his visits incurred great expense.

Some repair works seem to have been carried out but in 1538 the Act dissolving the monasteries was passed and Holm Cultram Abbey along with 1,600 acres of land and all its possessions was surrendered to Henry VIII. The abbey does not appear to have been demolished and in 1630 it was described as a great ruin. Over time the site was robbed of stone, some of which can be found in local buildings. Today the church is all that stands of the complex of buildings that were once the abbey.

The parishioners petitioned for the church to remain as a parish church and a refuge from the Scots and it has remained a place of worship. It often fell into disrepair and restorations have been carried out over the centuries. The church retains six of the bays of the nave of the original abbey church and these were subject to restoration begun in 1703 and further work in 1883 and 1913. There is also a fine Norman arch at the west doorway, and an arcade of pillars in the side walls. In 2006 a fire destroyed the roof, much of the interior of the church, and medieval records of the monastery were lost.

Recent archaeological investigations began in 2006 when the West Cumbrian Archaeological Society did a geophysical survey of the site which revealed the extent of the abbey and indicated foundations could be found in the field to the south of the church.

An evaluation excavation was undertaken in September 2008 when the Society opened a small trench in the field adjoining the abbey church. Several interesting finds were unearthed. Architectural fragments appeared in a jumbled dump but closer investigation showed that these fragments were all part of an arch. Evidence of a hearth and flagged floor were noted. The foundation trench on the south wall of the transept was identified but all the stone had been robbed. A lead weight was found weighing 450g and it has been dated to the second half of the fourteenth century. It was probably been used to weigh salt.

The group then sought funding to follow up these findings and in 2009 received a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Solway AOB to continue the work and a second excavation was undertaken to try to find the south west corner of the cloister. It proved to be very hard digging and the excavation was halted by the floods of that year. The entrance to the cloisters and possibly the lay brothers' lodgings were located in the main trench and evidence of the site of the chapter house was seen in an evaluation trench.

In 2010 the aim was to investigate the southern end of the range of buildings in the east and to find out more about the water supply. A good water supply was essential for drinking, cooking and the removal of waste from the site. Water was also needed for religious ceremonies and to power the mills. The Cistercian are known to have devised ingenious water systems which would have involved skilful engineering and it was hoped that some evidence of the water supply would be found at Holm Coultram.

A number of pits filled with cobbles were found and these may indicate the position of arches on the east range. The main drain of the site was identified and also a gully but its use is unknown. The artefacts that have been found are medieval and Jan brought one or two for members to look at and handle. These included the salt weight, fragments of tiles with beautiful geometric designs and pieces of carved stone. The results from tests of environmental samples are still awaited but evidence so far indicates that the monks enjoyed a varied diet which included pork,

mutton and oysters.

Jan concluded by saying that the Society hoped to find out more about the salt industry and to complete further surveys in the precincts of the abbey and possible locations may include Applegarth and Stank Ends which might be the site of the abbey's fish ponds.

The archaeological evidence to date has enabled an artist to draw a plan of the lay out of the Abbey in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and a picture to show what the abbey buildings might have looked like. Information leaflets are about to be published so that visitors will enjoy an interesting and informed visit to what is the site of a great Cistercian Monastery.

Jan was asked a number of questions before being thanked and warmly applauded

The next talk will be on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> March at 7.30pm, in the Supper Room, Market Hall Appleby when Ian Tyler will talk on *Gypsum Mining in the Eden Valley. 200 years of underground industrial history.*