

The Appleby Archaeology Group was privileged to hear the premiere of Harry Hawkins' talk on the history of the Armathwaite Nunnery at their second meeting of the winter season. Harry had stepped in at short notice after the original speaker had to cancel because of an injury.

The title of his talk was 'Medieval Forgers?' a reference to a suspect charter which Isabel, the Prioress, sent to King Edward IV in about 1470 for ratification. The charter purported to be the founding document of the Nunnery, granted in 1088 by William II, the son of the Conqueror. Before revealing the twists in the tale of the charter, Harry explained his research on the history of the Nunnery.

Starting with the archaeology, what exists on the ground today? The remains of the Nunnery were demolished in 1715 and the current house and model farm were built on the site by Henry Aglionby. Until the early 2000s, this was a hotel and was well known for the Nunnery Walks, leading down to the River Eden. Some members of the Group remembered the pleasant walks, followed by the equally pleasant tea and cake in the hotel. House and farm are currently Grade 1 listed and the estate is privately owned. In 2005, English Heritage commissioned building and geophysical surveys of the site. There were 13<sup>th</sup>C remains in the house, including a window arch, whilst the geophysics revealed various structures and anomalies in the grounds, including a possible gatehouse and a cloister. In a field nearby is a stone pillar inscribed with the date 1088 but this was first noted in 1755, so was probably erected by Aglionby to commemorate the Nunnery. Also nearby is a platform in a field which is believed to be the site of a chapel.

Harry continued by citing the earliest documentary evidence of the Nunnery in the writings of a monk, Gervase of Canterbury, which refers to the Black Nuns in Inglewood. Inglewood was the Royal forest which covered large parts of central Cumberland and the 'Black Nuns' were so called because of the black habits that they wore as Benedictines. Although the actual location of the Nunnery was not mentioned in the document, King John gave 'the nuns of Ermitethwaite in Cumberland' 1 mark in 1212. Armathwaite was just one of many Nunneries founded between 1100 and 1200, mostly of them poorly endowed and relying on alms. As with the monasteries, their founding principle was that of the desert fathers and, although often forgotten, the desert mothers, of the Old Testament. This academic bias was to some extent the fault of Victorian historians, often clergy and therefore men who, when writing the history of the church, neglected to mention the role of women. Harry told the Group that only in the last 25 years have academics, this time mostly female, begun detailed research.

The recorded history of the Nunnery is to be found in various court cases, grants of land and gifts in wills. The institution of a new prioress, Katrina Lancastre, is mentioned in 1362 and at some date, they were granted the advowson of Armathwaite Church.

Harry reasonably speculated that the name Ermitethwaite, being comprised of the elements 'hermit' (from the Latin with the same meaning) and the Old Norse 'thwaite' meaning 'clearing', referred to a hermit living in a clearing in the forest. It is thought that some Nunneries were founded by the gathering of a community of religious women around a hermit. Although there is no direct connection between

Armathwaite the village and the Nunnery – they are 6Km apart, the village was first mentioned in 1272, well after the foundation of the Nunnery, which is located in Ainstable parish. Harry explained that the most likely origin of the land on which the Nunnery was built was Roger, son of Matilda, the daughter of Adam, who was granted Ainstable by Henry 1.

It is unlikely that the Nunnery was ever very wealthy - in 1291, it was valued at only £13. The Prioresses would have generally been the daughters of prominent local families, the nuns from local families who could afford to give a dowry for the privilege. Being in the Borderlands, the Nunnery suffered badly from the depredations of the Scots and this might be behind the story of the 'Forgery'. Forgeries in the medieval church were rather commonplace and were often concocted to support either a pre-existing or a desired situation. For example, if a monastery required a writing to support its title to a property in lawsuit, an appropriate charter would be created, based on the belief of the monks that charters justified the ways of God to men. Amongst many others, both Westminster Abbey and Canterbury Priory had tried and succeeded using this ruse in the past.

So, speculated the speaker, were the nuns at Armathwaite simply doing the same thing? They had lost nearly everything to the Scots and all they had to go on was their continuing possession of assets which had been remembered orally, so the purpose was not to deceive or defraud, but to defend what they knew was theirs. Thus, they petitioned the King to confirm their 'charter'. In later centuries, this might have been dismissed as a forgery but at the time it was seen simply as God taking a hand in supporting their legitimate cause. In any event, Harry said, the King either believed the document was genuine or knew that it wasn't but didn't care. He issued Letters Patent in 1473 in which 'we accept, approve, ratify and confirm..... the title, estate and possession.....the same prioress and nuns have in the aforesaid house or priory, and in the lands, tenements, rents and possessions....'

Harry concluded his talk by saying that whether or not the William II charter was genuine, it had the desired effect because the Nunnery continued in existence until the Dissolution in 1537.

Harry was warmly thanked for his excellent talk by the appreciative company.

The next Appleby Archaeology talk will be on December 8th in the Market Hall supper room, when Dr Richard Newman will be recounting the excavations in the William Street car park on Botchergate in Carlisle, which have revealed a well-preserved Roman cremation cemetery containing some of the best-preserved finds from the North of England.