

An Abbey in the Vale of Nightshade

Appleby Archaeology Group's current season of evening talks came to a close on Tuesday when Dr Fiona Edmonds, Senior Lecturer in Celtic History at Clare College, Cambridge, spoke about Furness Abbey and her Daughter Houses. Dr Edmonds presented an interesting, detailed account of the Abbey's place in the complicated "Irish Sea Province" in the 12th and 13th centuries. She explained how Furness Abbey was part of this maritime sphere of influence, its links with Northern France, and how the Abbey extended its influence through the establishment of daughter houses.

The Abbey was founded in the 12th century and in its day was regarded as remote and isolated – early writers referred to it as a place "surrounded by perilous seas" and perceived it to be located at the far outer edge of the English kingdom. In addition it was situated in a part of England which was a turbulent region – there was always the threat of conflict with the Scots and the border lands between the two countries were notoriously unstable.

The geography of the Furness peninsula, protruding into the Irish Sea, meant that land-based communication with, and access to, Furness Abbey was difficult. Consequently the monks at the Abbey had to find ways of crossing land known to be dangerous if they were to receive visitors or make journeys themselves and they employed guides to help them cross treacherous sands and bays. We can thank these early monks for this because today's "Queen's Guides" are in a way "direct descendants" of those early guides who used to lead the monks safely across risky areas.

Piel Castle was constructed to guard the entrance to the monk's harbour and was probably a welcome sight to visiting travellers who would realise they were at least somewhere near this isolated Abbey.

During the 12th and 13th centuries monks came to England from Savigny in Normandy along with elite nobles and Lords, magnate families which included the future King Stephen. Using Savigny as the model mother house, Stephen founded abbeys over here – Tulketh Mill in Preston is now on the site of the former priory there. This community moved to the Furness site and Furness Abbey developed into one of the most powerful Cistercian monasteries in England. Despite being firmly rooted in its Norman beginnings Furness Abbey looked beyond its immediate vicinity. Dr Edmonds suggested how people in the region, including the monks at Furness Abbey, looked to the Celtic peoples of Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland, and also farther afield to Scandinavia. She showed images of several very early documents relating to the area and the monastery where place names and personal names indicated strong historical and cultural links to those areas. A Tax Collector's list for the region from the very end of the Anglo Saxon era showed a mix of Scandinavian and Gaelic personal names suggesting a mixed population, and further documents showed the high incidence of place names with links to other parts of the world including Ireland and Scandinavia. A relatively little-known figure, Jocelin of Furness, was writing in the 12th and 13th centuries and lived most of his life at Furness Abbey. His writings indicate a more far-reaching geographical interest and influence than one might imagine for such a remote Abbey. Jocelin is now perceived as one of the most important and influential medieval writers in Northern England.

Dr Edmonds went on to show how the monks at Furness Abbey became more involved in local communities and their Irish Sea connections and gradually moved away from their original international sphere and links with Savigny. The Abbey began to develop a network of daughter houses in a process called "filiation" where one abbot and twelve monks (representing Jesus and his disciples) would set off to establish monasteries elsewhere. In 1135, within a decade of its own

founding at Furness, the Abbey established daughter houses at Calder (near modern Sellafield), followed by Fermoy in Ireland, Rushen on the Isle of Man, and Swineshead in Lincolnshire to name just four. The wide geographical area shows the developing importance of Furness Abbey at this time. Initially the monastery at Calder was not a huge success as it was repeatedly attacked by the Scots, eventually destroyed by them, and the monks made homeless. The Abbot of Furness refused to take them back at the Abbey so they had to make their own way in the world, eventually establishing Byland Abbey on land given to them. There is a possibility that the establishment of Swineshead was due to the wool trade – many monasteries became very rich in the medieval era due to their involvement in this trade.

In 1351 the dead body of the then Abbot of Furness was found in the precincts of the Abbey and twelve jurors declared that he had been poisoned. It was decided that the guilt lay with three monks at the Abbey who had mixed together a lethal concoction of poisonous plants from the monastery physic garden – one of the poisons was *Atropa Belladonna* – Deadly Nightshade.

Furness Abbey fell into ruin during the 1530s in the Dissolution and its lands passed to the Duchy of Lancaster in 1540 but the far-reaching connections remain with the existence of modern multi-nationals, ship building heritage and the huge numbers of tourists to the area.