

Sockburn Hall A recent archaeological survey



In June 2007 members assisted a team from English Heritage to undertake an analytical field survey in the grounds of Sockburn Hall, situated on a peninsula formed by a loop of the River Tees in the Borough of Darlington. Near to the present house lie the ruins of All Saints' Church, the whole surrounded by the gardens and parkland belonging to the Hall. Nearby is a fording point of the river known as the Sockburn Wath. Numerous earthworks are visible in the grounds, many relating to the succession of mansions – and perhaps an earlier medieval hall – which preceded the present hall. The site is also notable for the remarkable collection of late 9th- and 10th-century Viking sculptured stones collected from within and around the church in the 19th century.

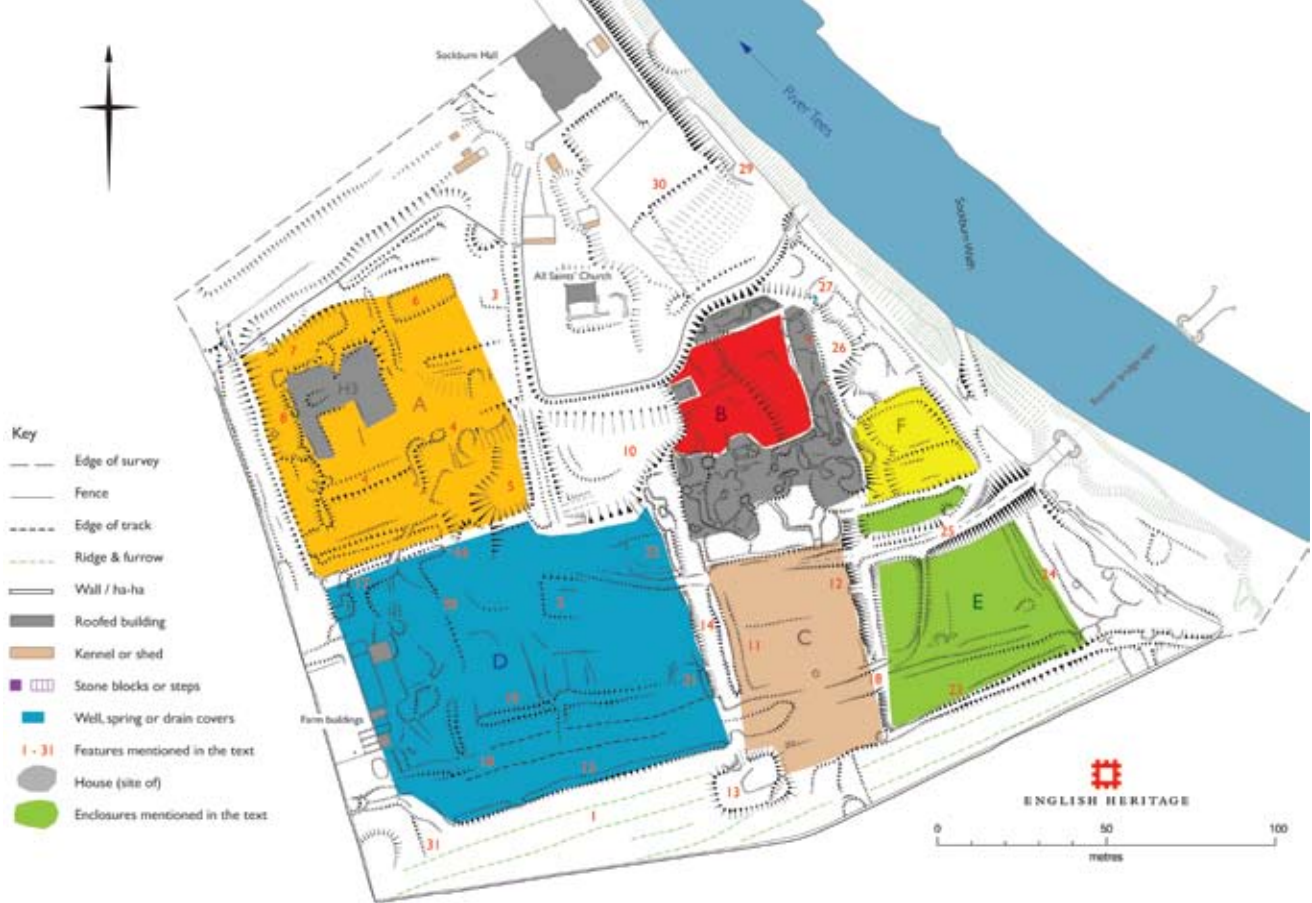
The Conyers family held the manor at Sockburn from c AD 1100 until late in the 17th century, and featured heroically in the legend of the Sockburn Worm. Like the tales of the Lambton Worm or the Laidley Worm of Spindleston Heugh, it belongs to a particular tradition of dragon-slaying fables found across the North-East of England. Although undoubtedly of far earlier origins, it is first recorded in a small heraldic book from the time of Charles I (1625–49):

'Sir John Conyers of Storkburn knt (knight) who slew ye monstrous venons and poysons wiverms. Ask or worme which overthrew and Devord many people in fight, for the scent of the poyson was soo strong, that no person was able to abide it, yet he by the providence of God overthrew it, and lyes buried at Storkburn before the Conquest, but before he did enterprise it (having but one sonne) he went to the Church in compleat armour and offered up his sonne to the Holy Ghost, which monumt is yet to see, and the place where the serpent lay is called Graystone'.

This story is believed to have provided Lewis Carroll, who spent part of his boyhood at nearby Croft, with the inspiration for the poem *Jabberwocky*. According to tradition, the Conyers' Falchion, a heavy sword now on display in the Treasury Museum of Durham Cathedral, was the weapon used to despatch the worm, and this became the symbol of the family's title to the manor of Sockburn under the Prince Bishops. A document dating to the late 14th century describes how it became the duty of the lord of Sockburn to present the Falchion to each newly appointed Bishop of Durham on his first entry to the diocese. He would then hand it back to indicate renewal of the tenure.



Sockburn Hall viewed from the site of the Conyers Mansion to the south (copyright C J Dunn)



The present hall was built by Henry Collingwood Blackett in 1834 and was accompanied by landscaping of the surrounding area into parkland, resulting in the closure of the church and its partial demolition to create a romantic ruin. To compensate, a new church was built in Girsby on the other side of the river and a new bridge built across the Tees beside Sockburn Wath.

Results of the survey

The earthwork survey identified the locations of two, perhaps three, earlier houses – medieval and post-medieval predecessors of the present hall, surrounded by former garden compartments – and charted the impact of 19th-century parkland creation across this earlier landscape. To the west of the church, extending towards the western boundary of the park, substantial ditches and banks delineate a rectangular enclosure measuring some 50 metres north–south by at least 30 metres east–west. A short-lived residence of the Blackett family is known to have stood here at the beginning of the 19th century, but this is unlikely to account for the extent and variation of the earthworks in this area. Possibly some of these are to be associated with formal gardens surrounding the Tudor mansion, or they could be much earlier in date. The position of the later Blackett house can be identified with some confidence, arranged around three sides of a small courtyard in the northern half of the enclosure (H3). The width of the ditches to the north, south and west are, however, totally out of character with what is known of the 18th-century residence. Instead, along with other features nearby, they may belong to a dry moat, aligned with the surrounding medieval fields and open towards the church. Overall, a good candidate for the site of the medieval hall. Stone is visible in the banks on the

north and east sides and so this enclosure might relate to Sir Christopher Conyers' licence to fortify his manor in 1470. The earliest house may have stood in the southern part of this enclosure.

A contorted pattern of scarps, hollows and mounds some 50 metres south of the church evidently reflect the site of a demolished building (H2). Stone-robbing and localised ferrous/magnetic disturbance obscures much of the detail but, overall, there is an impression of a building some 40 metres long orientated east–west. There is a suggestion of two broadly symmetrical bays or shallow wings projecting from the south side flanking a central protrusion, possibly a raised doorway or porch, with signs of a similar entrance on the north, perhaps slightly off-centre, between two corresponding bays. A second, much narrower range extends for about 35 metres northwards from the eastern corner of the main building. Together these ranges form an L-shape to the south and east of a courtyard c 40 metres square and divided into two levels, east and west, by a broad and shallow scarp, with further fragmentary traces of buildings to the north. Overall, the earthworks indicate a substantial house consisting of a main east–west range with a slighter range attached, the latter perhaps containing kitchens and service structures. Fragments of late 16th- or 17th-century green-glazed storage jars found at the point where the courtyard is cut by the ha-ha suggest a date for this building and support the likely domestic function of this element of the complex.

The extensive landscaping that complemented the neo-Jacobean hall included the construction of a long terrace to its east and the planting of many trees. The new bridge was built in 1837–8. Its timber superstructure was destroyed by floods in the late 19th century, but the massive brick-built piers still survive.

Research questions

Sockburn may plausibly be identified with the Anglo-Saxon monastery of *Sochasburg/Soccabyrig/Socceburg*, and topographically the site is well suited to the needs of an early monastic community; the loop in the River Tees providing enclosure, while ensuring access both by water and by land, via the wath. The site of All Saints' Church, on raised ground above a river, is typical for the main church of an 8th-century monastery; its alignment with a spring *c* 55 metres to the east may also be significant. Conceivably some of the fabric of the nave may be contemporary with the Episcopal consecrations of 780–1 and 796 (see Newsletter 6), or it could conserve the position and alignment of an earlier timber church. The monastic complex would have extended over a wide area and hints of early features (as yet undated) were found at some distance from the church.

The remarkable collection of Scandinavian memorial stones indicates the arrival of a new secular elite, whether a settled aristocracy, or traders drawn to towns such as

York and Lincoln, who also established beach markets alongside moorings or strands. The OS map of 1898 shows a long shingle beach inside the loop of the river and there would have been good communications along the Tees and across the ford towards the Roman road connecting Brough-on-Humber and Newcastle (Cade's Road). Conceivably Girsby, with its Scandinavian place name, could have developed as a Hiberno-Norse trading settlement, its elite being buried at the established church at Sockburn.

The post-Conquest estate may well have taken the area of the existing church and the wath crossing as its centre. The earthwork evidence is ambivalent, but it is possible that the Conyers' earlier manor lay to the west of the church. Like the earliest history of the site and the location and plan of the 17th-century mansion, this is one of the many questions that have yet to be answered. Landscape interpretation and geophysical survey have both done much to clarify the complex remains of this site but further elucidation can only be provided by excavation. David Mason County Durham Archaeologist

This article is a summary of a report prepared by Dave Went and Marcus Jecock of English Heritage's Research Department.



Surveying at Gainford

Fieldwork

The Society is delighted that David Petts, who initiated the fieldwork project at Gainford, has now returned to the Archaeology Department at Durham University, and has kindly agreed to take on the role of Fieldwork Officer for us. We are looking into several potential projects, and hope to be able to resume our fieldwork programme shortly. All those who would like to be involved, and who are not already on the Society's fieldwork list, please contact the Secretary, so that details can be circulated as they become available.

We will also pass on information from other groups and community excavations. Provisional dates for the community excavation at East Park, Sedgfield are 23rd June to 20th July; a Society field trip has been organised for 29th June, with a visit to the excavations, a return to Hardwick Park and lunch at the Hardwick Hall Hotel.

Natural dyeing practical

Owing to the poor attendance at the June lecture in recent years, we have decided to try something different this summer. Louisa Gidney, of Durham University and Rent-a-Peasant, has kindly agreed to host a hands-on session at the Botanic Gardens in Durham on 14th June, using weld to dye woollen cloth.

The use of weld, or dyer's rocket (*Reseda luteola*), is well documented in the archaeology of northern England. In Anglian York there is abundant evidence of its use as a yellow dye alongside madder for redder hues; by contrast, the Viking invaders favoured green and blue shades, using woad. The tradition of red and yellow dyes continues through the later medieval period, as found at the dye

works excavated at Beverley. Unlike madder and woad, weld is a relatively cheap dye. It is also an easy dye to work with, since the wool does not have to be mordanted separately.

Normal entrance charges to the gardens apply. The practical will take place outside, since it will involve lighting open fires. We shall meet at the visitors centre at 2.00 pm and the session will end at 4.00 pm, but members are welcome to take breaks to visit the gardens or café, if they wish. There is no charge for the dyeing workshop, but please let Belinda Burke know by Friday 6th June if you would like to attend, so we know how many to expect.

Programme 2008–09

All lectures will be held at Elvet Riverside, Room 141 New Elvet, Durham, at 2.30 pm (except where noted). Everyone is welcome to attend

- Saturday 1 March **The Neolithic long cairns of Northumberland Architecture and interpretation**
Ben Edwards Postgraduate Archaeology Student, Durham University
- Saturday 12 April **'Destructionology' What the study of castle destruction can tell us about England's Civil War past**
Dr Lila Rakoczy University of York
- Saturday 10 May **AGM in Piercebridge**
- Saturday 14 June **Natural dyeing practical at the Botanic Gardens**
2.00 pm note Please notify the Secretary if you wish to attend
- Saturday 20 September **Welcome to the cheap seats: cinemas, sex and landscape**
Shaun Richardson Ed Dennison Archaeological Services
- Saturday 11 October **The shock of the old Discovering Ice Age cave art in Britain** **Dr Paul Bahn**
- Saturday 8 November **Finding Bacchus Excavations at the sanctuary of Liber Pater, Dacia (Romania)**
Professor Ian Haynes University of Newcastle upon Tyne
- Saturday 13 December
2008 **Members Meeting**
- Saturday 10 January **From castle to country estate Recent work at Hornby Castle, North Yorkshire** **Erik Matthews**

Excursions

- Sunday 29 June **Hardwick Park and East Park excavations** Friends of Hardwick and Society President **Dr David Mason**
- Sunday 20 July **Birdoswald Roman Fort and RAF Spadeadam** **Phil Abramson** Historic Environment Advisor, Defence Estates
- Sunday 7 September **A walk around Newcastle** **Ian Ayris** Historic Environment manager, Newcastle City Council

Other local events

- Saturday 8 March **Durham County Archaeology Day**
For details please contact Department of Culture and Leisure, Durham County Council, telephone (0191) 370 8712
- Saturday 7 June **Sunderland Heritage Forum History Fair** **Seaburn Centre, Sunderland**
10.00 am to 4.00 pm For details, telephone (0191) 5678887 or e-mail sunderland.history.fair@hotmail.co.uk
- We shall have stalls at both the above events, and any offers of help would be very gratefully received
- Every weekend until 27 April **Archaeology-related craft activities for families** **Fulling Mill Museum** Visit www.dur.ac.uk/fulling.mill/events/
1 pm to 3 pm for a full list

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