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Archaeology in the North-East

Richard Carlton is director of an archaeological practice and attached to Newcastle University; he gave us a fascinating tour of recent excavations in North Northumberland.

The Flodden Pathways project (2016) focussed especially on the aftermath of the battle, examining maps, footpaths and place names, and noting the significant differences north and south of the border. The Project set out to identify the routes taken by James IV and his army going to Flodden in 1513 and the routes of the defeated troops straggling back, looking at the roads, river crossings, buildings, and the muster and battle sites.

The project concentrated on more than 20 ecclesiastical sites, because these include the majority of the buildings known to be in existence at that time, and on Norham and Wark castles which were taken by the Scottish army.

James IV's invasion was organised by the very efficient Scottish civil service. It was no small undertaking: estimates of the number of armed men vary between 20–100 thousand but, taking the lowest figure along with non-combatants, it is likely there were at least 40,000 people in total from all over Scotland, plus animals.

The majority of the army journeyed towards Flodden from Edinburgh, by way of Haddington, and assembled at Ellen, just north of present day Duns. The artillery came via Dalkeith and Kelso, crossing the Tweed at Coldstream.

The likeliest route for retreat is thought to be the Staw Road, which runs from Kirknewton (with a side shoot to Killham) through Kirk Yetholm to Otterburn; it was an important cross-border route which appears on 18th century maps and may well have been in existence much earlier. It was a wet late summer, so streams and major rivers were to be avoided as far as possible, and the Tweed was a major obstacle. The Border Survey (1541) lists 31 fords between Berwick and Crabbestream – some where there's solid rock can still be seen – but there was only one bridge extant, at Twizel.

James and 5–6,000 men were killed at Flodden, (and the English army had captured the artillery), so churches and monasteries may have been important as places of sanctuary for the survivors. Located along the Staw Road, St Ethelreda's Chapel is mentioned in 13th –16th century texts, but its exact location was unknown. The Project team identified 4 possible sites, excavating one on a low ridge by a flood plain, to reveal a wall and a fragment of medieval pottery: if not the chapel, it was the remains of a contemporary building.

in Scotland far fewer churches survive in their 16th century form, or at all, because of different religious history. However, the medieval walls and pottery of the nunnery at Abbey St Bathans may be relevant, while a separate project at the Lennel found the floor plan of a church which was abandoned in 1704.

Excavations in 2016 at Norham castle found only later roadways, At Wark bastle, excavations revealed the footprint of St Giles chapel, medieval coins and weapon heads, and deep pits containing fragments of pottery suggesting a site where the army was fed.

The excavations on Holy Island in 2017 made new discoveries. On the Heugh were found the footing stones of a rectangular structure with 2 chambers and 4 doorways; aerial photographs show evidence of stone walls and a few post holes. Near the war memorial, an extensive stone platform was found, possibly the base of a tower. The Lantern Chapel or Lookout Tower has footings, thick walls, and a void cut into the whinstone revealed the remains of 7 individuals. The full results are yet to be published.