

Cocwudu

Historic landscape between the Wansbeck, Font and Coquet rivers in Northumberland



Bernician
Studies Group

King Henry I of England (1100—1135) came to an arrangement with Gospatric, the earl of Dunbar. Juliana, the earl's daughter, was to leave her rocky castle home in Scotland and come to Northumberland. She was to marry the son of the conquering Norman baron of Morpeth, Ranulph de Merlay, and she would bring a dowry of land with her out of her father's lands in Northumberland.

This dowry consisted of the townships of Horsley, Stanton, Witton, Ritton and Wingates. It seems to have preserved, intact, an Anglo-Saxon estate of perhaps half a small shire in extent, and we can still recognise it in Northumberland today. This dowry is recorded in Latin in the charters of Newminster Abbey.

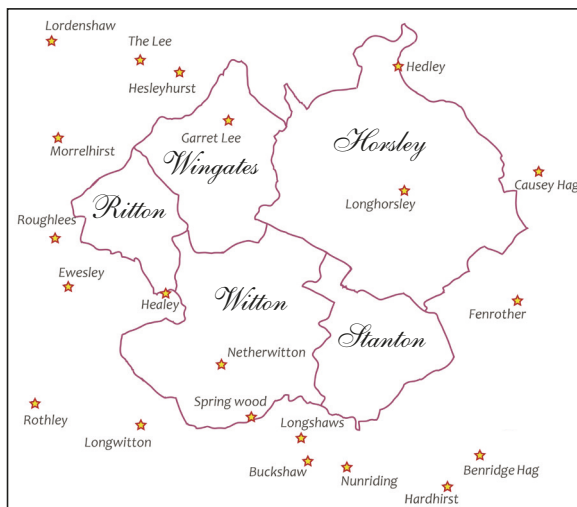
Carta Regia. Licentia by king Henry I to Ranulph de Merlay to marry Juliana, daughter of Earl Gospatric.

Henricus Rex Angli et dux Norman' . . . ministris (et) omnibus Baronibus suis Francis et Anglicis (Northumbriae), salutem. Notum sit omnibus vobis, me dedisse Ranulpho de Merlay Julianam filiam comitis Gospatricii, et sciatis quod inter me et patrem suum dedimus ei in liberum mariale, (sibi) atque haeredibus suis, scil. Horsley, Stanton, W(itton), Ritton', Wyndgates, et quandam villam ultra moras, ta(m liber)e quam aliquis potest liberius inter maria vel (alio) alicui dare tenendum in suo dominio. Et ex hoc praecipio (meis) Justiciariis ut videant quod



Professor Brian Roberts, an eminent historical geographer, has suggested that this area may have been part of an ancient woodland zone between the tribal lands to the north and south. This is based on the number of Old English place names which recorded woodland and clearances. These names are still in use today.

The Bernician Studies Group has begun field surveys and documentary search in the Gospatric townships and surrounding areas to test the woodland hypothesis. Over three years, we have recorded plants in about 50 woodlands, collated Ordnance Survey and earlier mappings of woodland, and read the Latin charters of Newminster Abbey and Brinkburn Priory.



The map shows possible boundaries of the original Gospatric estate, with sites of mainly Old English woodland place names.

Leah, meaning "woodland clearing": Horsley, The Lee, Garret Lee

Hyrst, meaning "a wood": Morrelhirst, Hesleyhurst

Sceaga, meaning "small wood": Longshaws, Lordenshaw

Hag, meaning "managed area of woodland": Causey Hag, Benridge Hag

Witton, meaning "wood settlement": Netherwitton, Longwitton

Riding, meaning "clearing": Nunriding

The woodlands of Coquet

The name Cocwudu was recorded in the *History of Saint Cuthbert*, a listing of church landholdings compiled in the 11th century. It seems to be a re-formation of the river-name Coquet and Old English *wudu*, meaning woodland.

How can we tell if the woods which still survive in these townships are ancient?

Eminent ecologist Dr Angus Lunn points out that woods are said to be ancient if they have had continuous tree cover since AD 1600, and semi-natural if trees have arisen spontaneously by natural regeneration. Such woods are now called Ancient Semi-Natural Woodlands. Dr Lunn suggests that a total of 16 species of small ground-level plants typical of lowland woods might indicate an Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland.

Mapping

BSG members selected some of the woods from the Gospatric estate and surrounding land to assess as Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland.

The group recorded all woodlands and township boundaries, as well as archaeological features, from the 1860s six inch-to-the-mile Ordnance Survey maps held at the Literary and Philosophical Society's library in Newcastle.

This was the same basis upon which English Nature and Northumberland County Council had sourced Ancient Semi-Natural Woodlands, choosing woods of a minimum of 2 hectares. Our members adopted this definition with field work for 50 woods, but also chose woods smaller than 2 hectares.



Field work

Welly boots on, and using standard recording sheets, we investigated tree cover including pollarding and coppicing, ground level plants species, and archaeological features such as woodbanks and ridge and furrow. We found substantial numbers of Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland indicator plants on woods on ancient township boundaries, frequently on steep deneside banks. Sometimes these were fragments of former more extensive woods. The ancestors of these plants take us back hundreds of years, perhaps to as long ago as Juliana's dowry, or earlier.

Moschatel, one of the significant Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland indicator plants, especially when found together with up to 16 other species.



X			Hard shield fern
			Remote sedge
		X	Guelder rose
X			Alt lv gold'n saxifrage
	X	X	Wood stitchwort
X		X	Wood melick
X		X	Lords and ladies
X	X	X	False brome
X		X	Wood sedge
X	X	X	Hairy woodrush
X		X	Wood forgetmenot
X			Sanicle
X		X	Moschatel
X		X	Wood speedwell
X		X	Woodruff
X	X	X	Dog's mercury
X		X	Ramsons
X	X	X	Wood sorrel
X	X	X	Bluebell
X	X	X	Wood anemone
Cockshot	Beggars	Broadwood	
Brinkburn	Bush	Mitford	

Above is an extract from our records, showing some of the Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland indicator species recorded for three woodlands. Space only allows a selection of the plants to be shown here.

Brinkburn: A monastery and town along the Coquet?

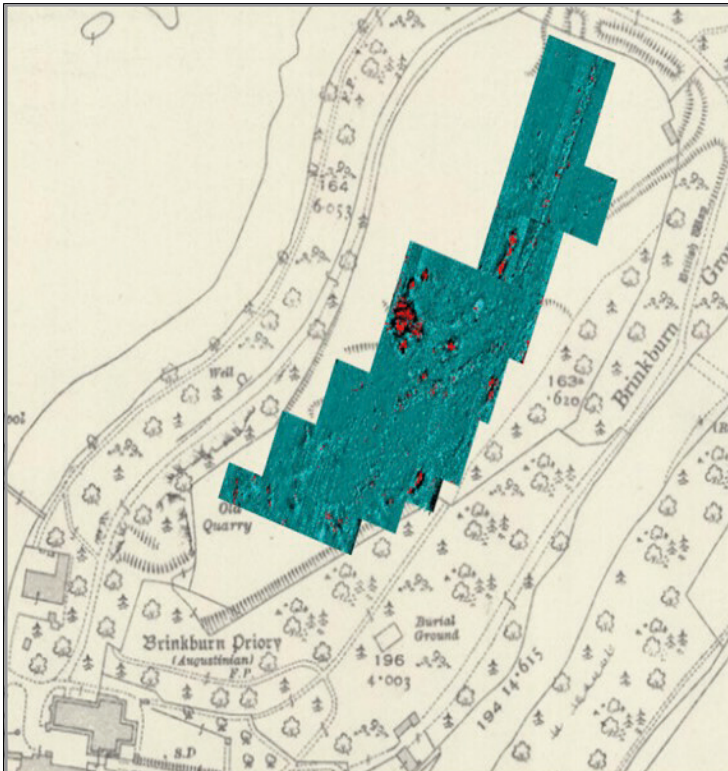
A Lindisfarne monastery?

In the 12th century, the Norman lord William Bertram of Mitford gave the land at Brinkburn for a church of Augustinian Canons. But was this the first church on the site, or was there an earlier, now-forgotten church?

We can read in the *history of St Cuthbert* that in AD 737 Ceolwulf, king of Northumbria, gave a large landed estate to the monastery of Lindisfarne. Its centre was at Warkworth and it reached south to the River Lyne. To the west, it took in *Brincewele*, Brinkburn as we now call it. See the extract, right.

And he gave to St Cuthbert the vill named Warkworth with its appendages. These are the boundaries of this vill: from the river called Lyne to the Coquet; and from thence to the civitas called Brinkburn; and from the Coquet eastwards to Hauxley; and from the Aln to the mid-point of the road between Coquet and Aln.

A town of Coquet?



King Ceolwulf's grant calls Brinkburn a *civitas*, a town, similar in status to York and Carlisle.

Another document, the *Ravenna Cosmography*, compiled in about AD 700, listed a *civitas*, or town, of Coquet. It is very likely that both refer to the prehistoric promontory fort whose defensive embankment we see alongside the car park for Priory visitors.

Our first geophysical test survey at Brinkburn suggests a trackway, some rectangular buildings and a circular area – see the diagram left.

Geophysical survey

The Bernician Studies Group has begun work on the promontory to try to understand why it was called a town. Geophysical survey is a non-intrusive technique aimed at seeing what is beneath the surface of the ground.

We use a magnetometer, which detects the intensity of the earth's magnetic field at particular points. The surveyor marks out the area in a grid, and then walks over it in parallel straight lines. Typically we take 6,400 readings in a square of 20 metres by 20 metres. Variations in the magnetic intensity show former disturbance of the ground below the surface. Results may show regular patterns of lines, curves or circles, as above. We now need to refine these results.



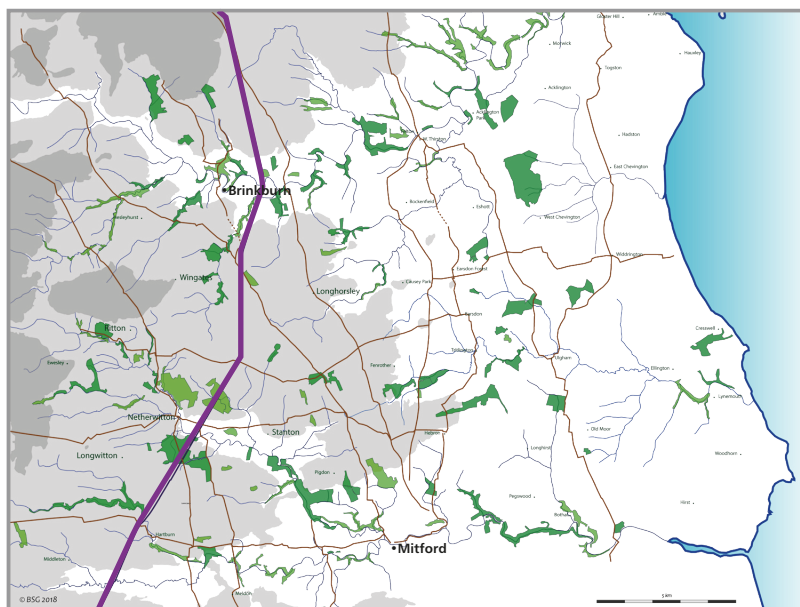
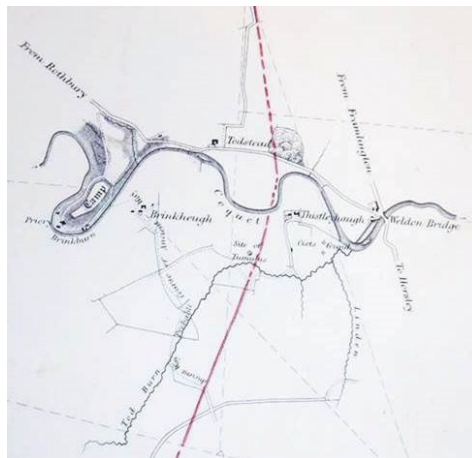
Routeways through Cocwudu

Roman road

A Roman road known as the Devil's Causeway led from Hadrian's Wall all the way to Berwick upon Tweed, right through the heart of Cocwudu. It crossed the Coquet near Brinkburn.

In the Anglo-Saxon period, part of the road just north of Hartburn was called Herepath, the Old English word for a road used by the king's armies. It is known locally as the *Happath* to this day.

In the 19th century the surveyor Henry MacLauchlan recorded an 'Ancient British Way' that branched off the Devil's Causeway and led to a ford or bridge at Brinkburn.



Ancient trackways

This map shows the Devil's Causeway, in purple, which disregards the direction of other routes through mid-Northumberland. Most of them seem to run from SSE to NNW, from the various crossings of the River Wansbeck towards the high pastures of the Cheviot hills. The reason for this discrepancy is not precisely known.

Some of the routes shown may have been used by traders or to move animals to summer pastures.

One runs north from Mitford towards the ford at Brinkburn. This looks like an important route between the crossings of the Wansbeck and the Coquet.

The map also shows the intermittent patches of woodland, many of which have been investigated by our group. Many ancient woods cling obstinately to denes which interrupt these routes, often running east to west. There is much more to be learned about the pattern of these routes and their relationship to Cocwudu's historic woodland landscape.

The Bernician Studies Group is an educational charity dedicated to the study of north-east England and its wider connections during the early medieval era. It is associated with the lifelong learning programme, Explore, based in Newcastle upon Tyne.

BSG is engaged on fieldwork in Northumberland and in north-west Ireland under the guidance of its Research Directors, Max Adams and Colm O'Brien, who are Visiting Fellows of Newcastle University. BSG fieldwork is covered by public liability insurance of £2,000,000 Charity registration number: 1170897.

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