

Torksey Test Trench 2012

Report on a Trial Trench Excavated near Torksey, Lincolnshire 13th-16th December 2012



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Introduction and Aims

The modern village of Torksey is known as the site of a Viking winter camp from an entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for AD 872.¹ A growing body of archaeological evidence offers the potential of placing the site in its broader chronological and spatial context. Previous work has focussed on the pottery industry associated with an Anglo-Scandinavian town or burh (Barley 1964; 1981). Recent metal detector finds have also suggested Torksey may be an Anglo-Saxon 'productive site', implying that Viking occupation must be seen in the context of pre-existing Saxon inhabitation (Blackburn 2002; 2011).

The aim of the Torksey assessment project is to understand the role and significance of Torksey by plotting the chronological and spatial development of the various centres of activity, which have been tentatively identified through metal detecting. These include the Viking winter encampment and wider trading site, the Anglo-Scandinavian burh and the Torksey ware kilns.

The project has identified six fields to the north of the modern village of Torksey and south of Marton as representing the core of the Viking winter camp. This occupied an area of higher ground to the east of the River Trent and overlooking its floodplain, and largely to the west of the current line of the A156. The majority of Anglo-Scandinavian metalwork has been recovered from these fields and the project has undertaken field-walking, metal detector survey, and geophysical survey as part of the overall assessment and reconnaissance. The geophysical survey and field-walking undertaken in this area, as well as other outputs of the Torksey assessment project are the subject of separate reports.

During the course of the metal-detector survey Andrew Marriott observed and collected a scatter of fragmentary human bones, over an area of c.50 m² (see below). The area was towards the western edge of one of the fields as it sloped downhill towards the Trent, and it was being badly disturbed as it lay in the centre of a tractor turning circle. The field is known locally as the Halfway House field, is sometimes referred to colloquially by the metal detector users as 'styca alley', and was labelled Field D by the Torksey assessment project. The magnetometer survey (Brown in prep) indicated a number of anomalies in this area and it had been suggested that these might represent grave cuts.

The purpose of the excavation reported here was therefore to undertake a small rescue excavation in case there were more human bones. It is hoped to establish the depth of plough soil and nature of deposits in the area from which surface finds of human bone had been made, and to ascertain if there were any surviving traces of graves or grave cuts.

The physical archive and paper records for the Torksey project will be deposited in Lincoln Museum, under the accession code TOR12. The digital archive will be deposited with the Archaeology Data Service under doi:10.5284/1018222.

¹ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, s.a. 873; trans Whitelock 1979, 194

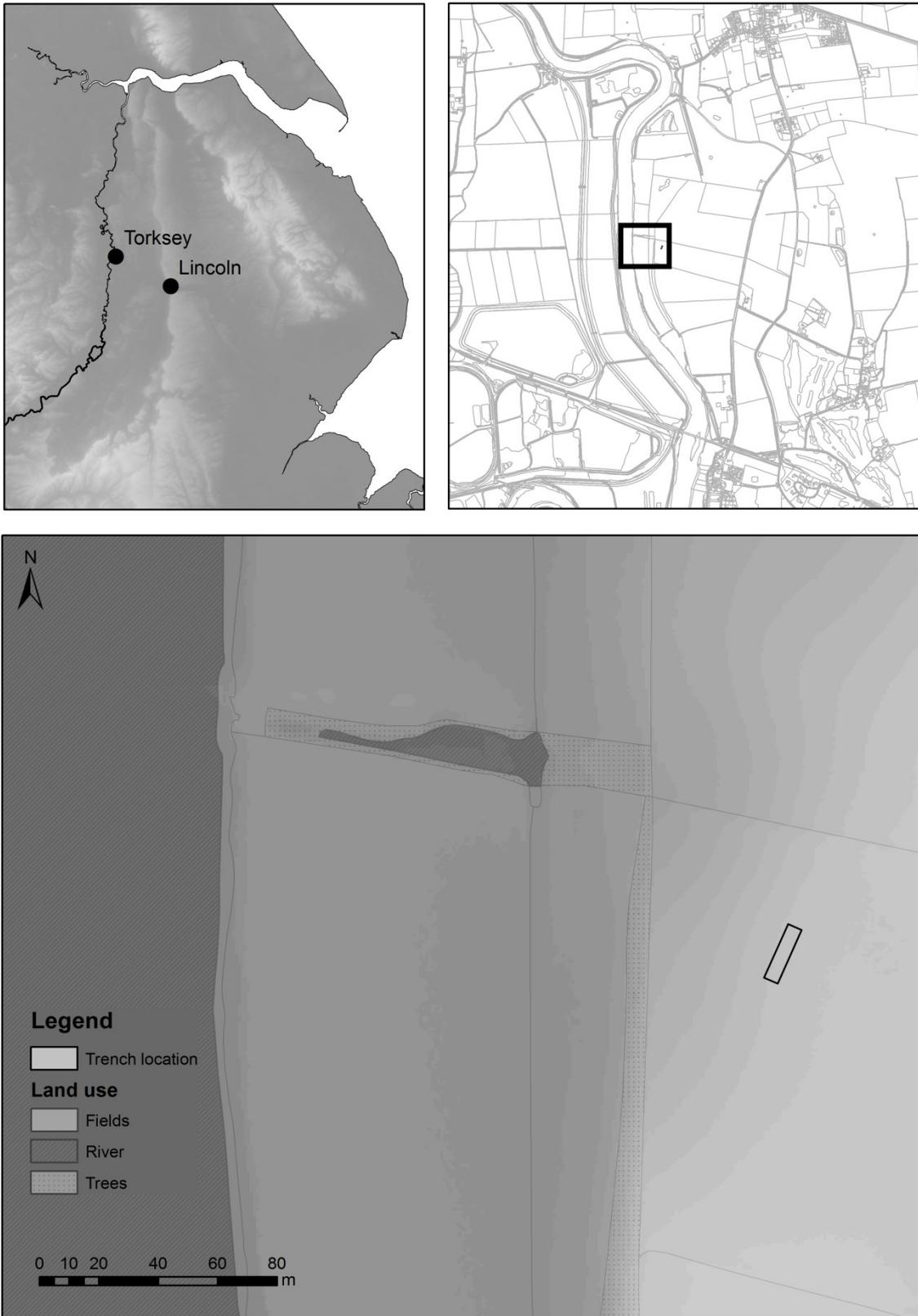


Fig 1: Location plan, showing area between Marton and Torksey (top right) and trench position (below); (figure by Helen Goodchild)

The Human Bone

The surface scatter of human bone was recovered from an area of c.50 m², in the north-west corner of Field D, also known as the Halfway House Field. From January – October 2012 over 30 fragments of human bone were collected, later identified as belonging to at least two individuals, of which one was a young adult male.

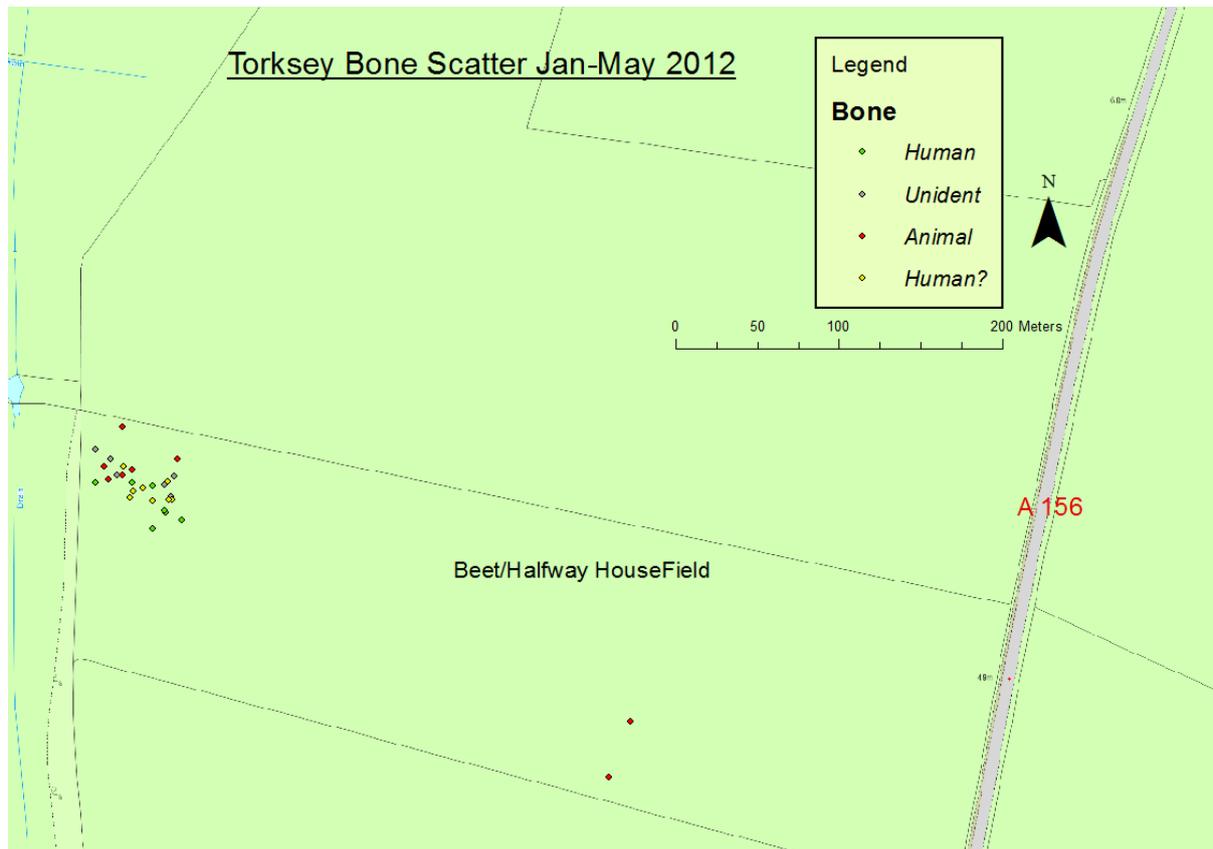


Fig 2: Plan showing location of human bone scatter (figure by Andrew Marriott)

Two samples were taken from cranial fragments for radiocarbon dating. These yielded dates calibrated to 2 sigma to AD770-900 or AD920-940 and AD 830-840 or 870-990. This confirmed that the human bones could well be contemporary with the documented overwintering of the Viking Great Army in AD 872-3, and that the assemblage could therefore be of considerable archaeological interest.

The human bones recovered by the project are subsequently going to be the subject of a more detailed analysis and full report by Victoria Pichler (Pichler in prep).

Methodology

A rectangular area of c.20m x 5m, aligned roughly north-east / south-west, was defined as the focus of excavation (SK 833803). This lay roughly in the centre of the bone concentration and in line with the contours. It was hoped that any grave cuts in this area would be cut by the trench.

Ground conditions during the four-day excavation were extremely poor. The area had been badly churned by tractors covering the carrot crop in the field with straw, and there were wheel ruts up to 0.3-0.4m deep. Sub-zero temperatures during the preceding days meant that the ground was heavily frozen and the wheel ruts were levelled by mattock with some difficulty on Day One. Rapid thawing on subsequent days exacerbated difficulties as the surrounding wheel ruts filled with water which drained into the trench. Trowel cleaning of the northernmost 10m of the trench revealed a few possible features, but on excavation these proved to be natural. Indeed, the excavation demonstrated a very shallow subsoil, with plough grooves cutting into the natural clay or sand in several places. Across the trench natural was encountered at 0.4-0.5m below the present day ground level. All finds were plotted by tape offsets or total station. There was a metal detector user present on site throughout the excavation and all metal signals were marked for subsequent excavation by trowel.



Fig.3: Trowel cleaning of the trench

TORK12 Test Trench

Given the adverse weather conditions only the northern section of the planned trench, 5m x 10m, was excavated to natural. Finds were allocated to three horizons. The top layer encountered was the plough soil (Context 100). This comprised a mid grey brown sandy clay, c.0.35m in depth, with occasional sub-rounded stones. It was heavily rutted and also rooted, and contained occasional disturbed finds. Below the plough soil was layer 101, also a mid grey brown sandy clay, but with occasional patches of mixed material, including light bluish grey clay, dark brownish red sand, reddish clay, and greyish brown red clay, containing occasional sub-angular sandstone fragments and occasional finds. All finds are listed in Appendix 1. This subsoil is interpreted as mixed plough soil and underlying natural, leading to the patches of sand and clay. Finally, at a depth of 0.35m natural (context 103) was encountered across the trench. This comprised a mixed surface of sand and clay, including patches of light bluish grey clay, dark brownish red sand, reddish grey clay, and greyish brown red clay, with patches of gravel. It was criss-crossed by plough scars up to 0.1m wide, of unknown date, but presumably of recent origin.



Fig 4: The north-east corner of the trench, illustrating the colourful variation in the natural ground surface

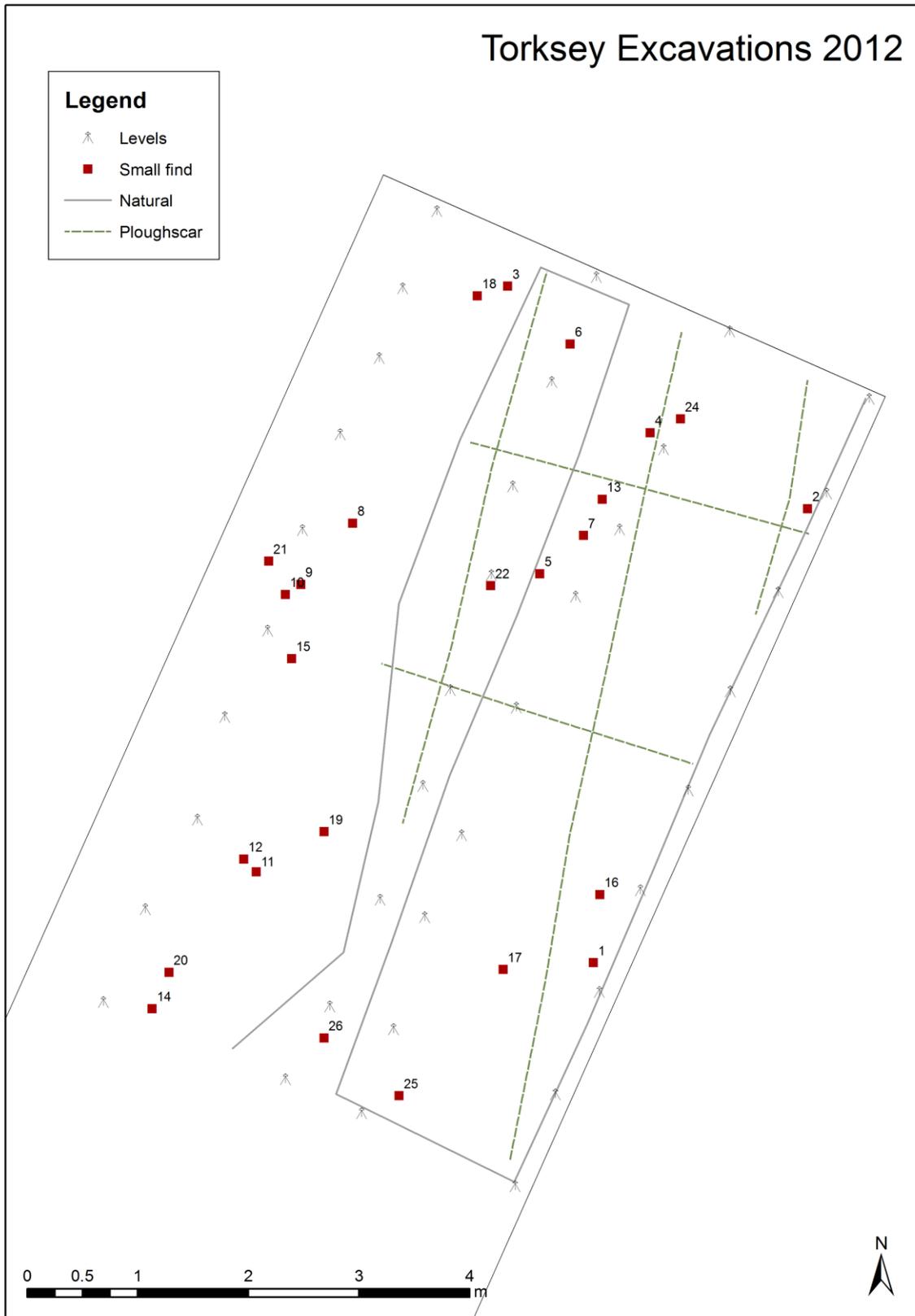


Fig 5: Final trench plan, showing location of all finds (figure by Helen Goodchild)

Discussion

The test trench demonstrated that in this area of the winter camp site plough disturbance is very extensive and is cutting into the subsoil natural deposits. There were no traces of any grave cuts and all finds came from the disturbed plough soil. The surface finds of human bone were small fragments and heavily abraded and may have been subject to plough disturbance for some time. The absence of any truncated graves cutting into natural suggests that the graves themselves may originally have been fairly shallow, although it is also possible that surface erosion has truncated the original ground surface in this part of the site, as it lies down slope from the main concentration of activity. The surface bones may have travelled a little down slope from the original burial site, but it is generally believed that surface scatters of finds do not move far in a horizontal direction. The natural geology in this part of the site is different to that of much of the winter camp area. The badly draining natural heavy clay just off the natural ridge contrasts to the well drained sandy soils further to the east. It is tempting to speculate that this difference in the natural geology as well as the natural topography and location overlooking the Trent was one of the reasons for the choice of this location for a small number of burials. The existence of a more extensive cemetery is unproven, pending further examination. Similarly, there was no trace of any negative features corresponding to the anomalies observed in the magnetometer survey in this area, but the variations in natural geology and the magnetic contrast between iron-rich and non-iron rich deposits may account for the apparent features.

Acknowledgements

The Viking Torksey assessment project is a collaboration of the Universities of Sheffield and York with the British Museum, with the additional participation of staff of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge and Portable Antiquities Scheme. The project leaders are Dawn Hadley (University of Sheffield), Julian Richards (University of York) and Gareth Williams (The British Museum). Other project personnel are Steve Ashby, Andrew Marriott and Søren Sindbæk (University of York), Samantha Stein and Gareth Perry (University of Sheffield), Andy Woods (Fitzwilliam Museum), Hannah Brown (University of Bradford), Adam Daubney and Rachel Atherton (Portable Antiquities Scheme), and Jane Young (freelance pottery specialist).

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The TORK12 excavation was directed by Julian Richards, with on-site assistance from Tony Austin, Helen Goodchild, Alison Leonard, and Andrew Marriott (University of York); Martin Huggon, Gareth Perry, and Samantha Stein (University of Sheffield), and freelance metal detector users, Dave and Pete Stanley and Neil Parker.

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Appendix One

TORK12 finds

Context	Find number	Material	Date/type
100	1	Bone	
100	2	Pot	
100	3	Pot	Post-medieval
100	4	Pot	
100	5	Flint	Core?
100	6	Bone	Human skull?
100	7	Bone	
100	8	Bone	
100	9	Pot	
100	10	Pot	Post-medieval
100	11	Bone	
100	12	Bone	
100	13	Pot	Post-medieval
100	14	Bone	
100	15	Pot	Post-medieval
100	16	Pot	
100	17	Pot	Post-medieval
100	18	Cu alloy pin	
100	19	Bone	
100	20	Pot	Medieval
100	21	Tile	
101	22	Pot	Post-medieval
101	24	Bone	
101	25	Bone	
101	26	Bone	
Unstrat	27	Pot	Post-medieval
Unstrat	28	Bone	
Unstrat	29	Pot	Post-medieval
Unstrat	30	Fe	Nail head
Unstrat	31	Fe	Musket ball
Unstrat	32	Fe	frag
Unstrat	33	Fe	frag