ART. VII. – *Eaglesfield: the place, the name, the burials.* By P. A. WILSON.

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EAGLESFIELD would scarcely be known to history had it not been the nursery of two men both of whom in their different ways contributed to the advancement of knowledge: Robert de Eglesfeld, chaplain to Edward III's queen Philippa and founder of the Oxford college named after her, and John Dalton, one of the fathers of modern physics and chemistry. It is a place of no great size or population, and though once an independent township it lost its independence in the 1930s when it was absorbed in the civil parish of Dean. Ecclesiastically it has belonged since 1883 to Mosser, having previously belonged to Brigham; but unlike so many townships in that once far-flung parish it never had a chapel of its own. Yet a glance at the map shows it as quite a hub with roads radiating from it like the spokes of a wheel as though at some distant date people had good reason for finding their way there. Its archaeology has figured from time to time in *Transactions,* principally on account of burials that have been found there, and because of a Roman road which is supposed to have traversed the township from north to south, but which has not been proved by excavation nearer than Shawbank Brow, NY 082275, close to the village of Dean.[1]

Of the burials the first to be discovered, in 1814, was that of a Viking warrior, with whom were deposited a sword now in the Black Gate Museum in Newcastle, and other objects which are discussed by Mr Cowen.[2] But there were other burials referred to briefly in 1860 and 1877,[3] the details of which long remained unpublished. Not unnaturally it was suspected that here might be an unrecognized Viking cemetery, and Mr Cowen in his first article on Viking burials in our area,[4] and also in the pages of *Archaeologia Aeliana,*[5] appealed to his readers for further information about these, which most fortunately was forthcoming, and was published in *Archaeologia Aeliana,* [6] but not in our pages. All the author said in his second article in *Transactions* was that there was nothing Viking about these other burials, and that "the notion of an unrecognized Viking cemetery must be abandoned".[7]

When we turn to the Newcastle article what we find is that about 1840 Henry Dalton, a near relation no doubt of the more famous John being aware of the 1814 discovery, was moved to search the area for further burials which he found and described but never published. Most happily for us his notes were preserved by his descendants, were published by Mr Cowen in the Newcastle article, and are here reprinted below. As we shall see they were oriented burials, and were not furnished with grave goods. The site of the discoveries is shown on the early large-scale O.S. maps, at NY 091287, on the east side of the road from Brigham to Eaglesfield.

I turn next to the place-name, the first syllable of which is short in the vernacular pronunciation. It has been explained as meaning "*Ecgel's* open land", where the personal

name, though not found in independent use, is a normal diminutive of compound names such as *Ecglaf* and *Ecgwulf*.[8] Quite some time ago it occurred to the present writer that the topographical and archaeological findings outlined above would be interestingly accounted for if, on the analogy of Egglescliffe, co. Durham, the name could be explained as an *eccles* name, meaning in that case open land near a British church, a feature recognized for what it was by the first Anglian settlers when they arrived and settled some two miles away down below at Brigham.

The name Brigham belongs to the earliest stratum of English names in Cumberland, having the element *-ham* with long -a- of which there are only five others in the county (and only two – once three – in Westmorland). Its meaning is given as "homestead by the bridge",[9] presumably a Roman bridge still intact, or recognizable remains of one. The church at Brigham has, with other pre-Norman sculpture, a cross-fragment with vine-scroll ornament which Mr Bailey dates late 8th century or early 9th.[10] It was by far the most important church in the area, serving a parish of some 39,000 acres in the later Middle Ages, and that was probably less than its original extent, as we shall see. So if the alternative etymology for Eaglesfield could be accepted, we could see the church down below by the river as the Anglian successor of the British *ecclesia* on the hill above; while the burials, to which we return later, could be explained as coming from a graveyard belonging to the latter.

The presence of a Viking burial among the others at Eaglesfield is no objection to the hypothesis that here was a Christian graveyard. Those of our members who were at Lowther in May 1974 will remember Mr Lang telling us that Vikings rather liked being buried in Christian graveyards before as well as after their conversion; while the whole subject of the attitude to Christianity of the Vikings of northern England has been discussed in a most illuminating article by Professor David Wilson.[11] To this we need only add that there is evidence also for a Viking burial in Brigham churchyard.[12]

The topography of the ancient parish of Brigham is a subject deserving of examination in its own right. It would be an anachronism to postulate the existence in Dark Age England of parishes as we know them in the later Middle Ages and in modern times. The date at which the perambulation of the bounds of a parish at Rogationtide became customary can seldom be determined; but it is reasonable to suppose that whenever a new church was founded the area that it was to serve would soon be settled by custom and convenience, even where it was not founded by some local lord expressly to serve the tenants residing upon a defined estate. In that sense I think we should be justified in saying that it looks as though the English Brigham may have inherited the "parish" of an earlier British *ecclesia,* which had previously served the inhabitants of the same or a similar area. I want now to try and define the area rather more closely.

The accompanying sketch map (Fig. 1) shows an area rather larger than that of the later medieval parish. It is roughly triangular in outline, being bounded on the north, the base of the triangle, by the river Derwent from its confluence with the Marron below Bridgefoot to the outlet of Bassenthwaite Lake. On the east it is bounded first by that lake, and thereafter by a line which, having attained the watershed on the summit of Lord's Seat, follows it more or less all the way to the summit of Brandreth, the apex of the triangle. Thence it follows the watershed again to Burnbank Fell above Loweswater, and from there it follows Meregill Beck, Snary Beck, and the river Marron down to where that falls into the Derwent.

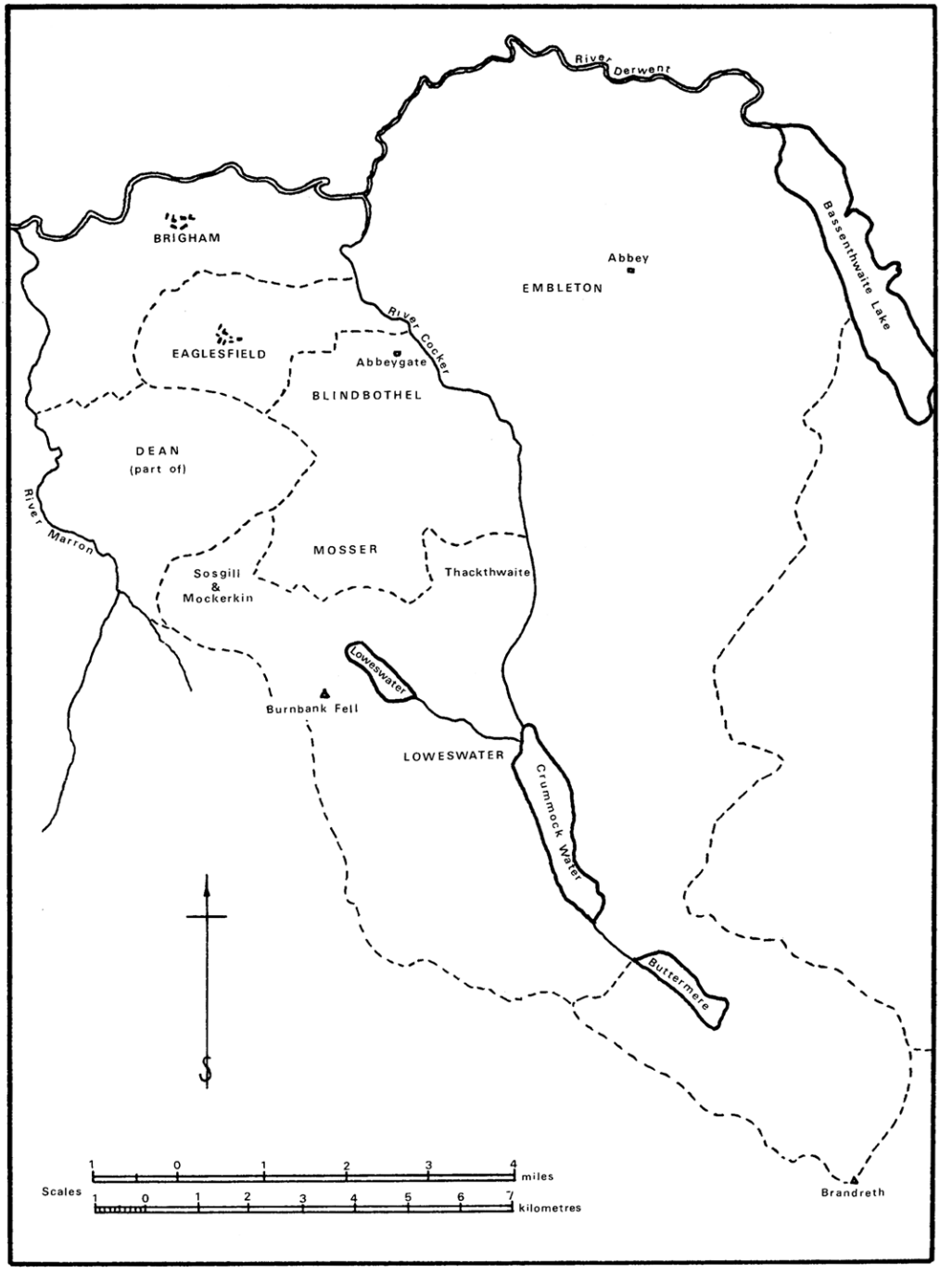

FIG. 1 – The ancient parish of Brigham with Loweswater (St. Bees) and part of Dean.

This area is a natural unit, nearly 52,000 acres in extent,[13] embracing the north-western fells, dales, and foothills, and it is almost exactly bisected by the river Cocker and the lakes of Crummock and Buttermere. But it was not in the later Middle Ages an ecclesiastical unit. The chapelry of Loweswater, of more than 9,000 acres, belonged to St. Bees, while another 3,000 acres, contiguous with Loweswater on the north-west, belonged to Dean, a parish that straddled the river Marron; only the remainder then belonged to Brigham. But while this was the position from the 13th century onwards, there is evidence that it had not always been so.

The bounds of the parish of St. Bees, as they were at the time of the founding of the priory, *c.* 1125, are set out in one of the founder's charters,[14] and they ran from the sea at Whitehaven (up Bransty Beck and down Priestgill) to the Keekle, down the Keekle to where it falls into the Ehen, and down the Ehen to the sea. Within a century or less Egremont had been carved out of St. Bees to form an independent parish, while vast areas of fell and dale in Eskdale, Wasdale, Ennerdale, and Loweswater, had been added to it in circumstances of which no record survives. The Loweswater folk not surprisingly objected to this and tried to break away, but it was not until the 16th century that they won the right to bury their dead in the graveyard of their own chapel.

Not only that, there were disputes about tithes and other parochial perquisites in all the vills contiguous with Loweswater along its nothern boundary, Thackthwaite, Mosser, and Sosgill and Mockerkin, suggesting that this boundary was a thing of no great antiquity. Thackthwaite and Mosser were claimed by Brigham, Sosgill and Mockerkin by Dean; all were awarded to St. Bees except Mosser, which Brigham was allowed to retain subject to the payment of an annual pension to the priory. There was a similar dispute between Dean and Workington relating to the Cliftons, west of the Marron, which suggests, as does the configuration of its boundaries, that Dean like Egremont was a late arrival on the parochial map. When these disputes first arose we do not know, but judgement was awarded during the pontificate of Honorius III, 1216-27.[15]

I now return to the place-name. "Eccles in English Place-Names" was the subject of a paper by Professor Cameron presented to a conference on Christianity in Roman and sub-Roman Britain held in Nottingham in 1967.[16] He is very guarded in his discussion of what the English settlers understood by this term when they borrowed it from the Britons who dwelt among them, for as he points out no British church-site has yet been identified on the ground at any of the places in whose names this element is found. The names listed and discussed by him number twenty, apart from a few in Scotland supplied by Dr Nicolaisen, to which many more must now be added;[17] but Eaglesfield does not figure in his list. However since his paper was first published further spellings have come to light and to a recent reprint of the paper he has appended a note on these suggesting that the Cumberland name may well be another example of the type.[18] We may therefore now go on to inquire if in addition to onomastic evidence for an early Christian site here we can claim that we have the support of archaeological evidence as well. Dalton's account, written in 1841 and printed by Mr Cowen, is as follows:

> A great many bones have been found in the last year or two. I went frequently and took much pains to remove the soil off them. I think none were buried deeper than 16 inches, most of them 5 to 6 feet long. I found one only about 3 feet. I found one with good teeth and mouth wide open and filled with dirt. I found one skull laying over the right side, the eyes towards Eaglesfield .... It is very evident no coffins have been used, for the graves are not level at the bottom as the scull is a little higher or more properly not quite so deep. The graves were at a little distance off

one another, about 8 or 10 inches of soil and the rest picked out of the rock which is very mushy.

It will be noted that there is no mention of grave goods such as were found deposited with the Viking warrior, while since the site is to the north of the village the skull on its "right side" facing the village guarantees the orientation of the burials. How does this account, we must now go on and ask, compare with parallels elsewhere? In fact three such parallels can be found on the opposite shore of the Solway Firth.

The nearest dug-grave cemetery to Eaglesfield is at Camp Hill, Trohoughton, NX 996726, a couple of miles south of Dumfries and 28 miles as the crow flies north of the Eaglesfield site.[19] Here excavation in the early 1960s revealed a bivallate hill fort where the final phase of its history was marked by the digging of numerous graves containing inhumation burials which had partially obliterated earlier features.[20] Some 60 graves or portions of graves were identified of which 12 were excavated. They averaged 5 ft. 10 ins. in length 2 ft. in width, and 20 ins. in depth. All were rectangular in plan and had vertical sides and flat bottoms. Orientation varies between E-W and NE-SW. They were filled with earth on top and a clayey deposit with stones below. Only in one case were human remains found, and there were no grave goods. "From their form and orientation", the excavators concluded, "it may be assumed that the graves belong to the Early Christian period";[21] while elsewhere Professor Thomas has referred to them as "typical" of this period.[22] Compared with those from Eaglesfield they differ only in being flat at the bottom, and, as it would appear,[23] in being more widely and more irregularly spaced.

Rather further afield is the interesting site of Ardwall Isle, NX 5749, lying off what was the Kirkcudbrightshire coast not far from Gatehouse of Fleet.[24] During the excavator's Phase I, with which alone we are here concerned, an unknown number of oriented inhumations took place. Owing to disturbance during subsequent phases it is impossible to say how deep the graves were; but it was the impression of the excavator that they were dug only a foot or so deep through the contemporary turf and into the easily broken slaty bedrock below. They were comparatively narrow and only long enough to take an extended adult; while here the head (or west) end of the grave was cut slightly deeper than the rest. No complete undisturbed Phase I skeleton could be recovered, but there was ample evidence of the scattering of these primary inhumations by the digging of Phase II and later graves.[25] The Phase I burials cannot be closely dated, but a date in the 6th or 7th century was thought likely.[26]

Also deserving of mention in this context are the extended and oriented inhumations lying in dug graves beneath the east end of the priory church at Whithorn in Wigtownshire. I am not aware if these have yet been fully published, but they are referred to in Professor Thomas's Nottingham conference paper "The Evidence from North Britain".[27]

The parallels cited are close enough I think to lend support to the hypothesis that what Dalton found and described was an early Christian cemetery of the dug-grave variety. We must next inquire (1) whether there are other features on or near the site which would help to confirm the hypothesis, and (2) whether there are objections to it that we ought to consider. It would help to confirm it if we could find evidence that the burials were situated within an enclosure defining the area of consecrated ground, or if we could find somewhere in the vicinity signs of enclosures and structures similar to those found

on monastic sites in Ireland.[28] Such features have already been photographed from the air by Professor St. Joseph and Professor Barri Jones at Ninekirks, Brougham, though these as yet remain unpublished; while similar findings have been made by Miss Faull in the field called Eccles at Stanbury, SD 010370, in the West Riding of Yorkshire.[29] But at Eaglesfield there is little hope of discovering anything like this. The field where the burials were found has all been quarried away, while such of the fields nearby as have not suffered this fate have been much disturbed by old lime workings.

I can think of two objections to the hypothesis. Dr Butler, it will be recalled, makes mention of a battle or skirmish that took place at Eaglesfield in 1216 and is mentioned in the Chronicle of St. Mary's Abbey, York.[30] Could the (non-Viking) skeletons belong to the victims of that encounter? I think not for three reasons. (1) It was the custom, I am assured, for the survivors of a battle on each side to assemble the bodies of their own dead and arrange for their interment in consecrated ground; and whether or not our site had once been consecrated ground there is no reason whatever to think that it was so regarded in the 13th century. Where this was not done a mass grave would be dug and the bodies and mutilated limbs flung in helter-skelter. Now (2) Dalton, plainly a keen observer, makes no mention of mutilated limbs; while (3) he does mention one skeleton only three feet in length, and that could hardly have belonged to a man killed in battle.

Another possibility is that we see here the victims not of battle but of plague. The fullest account I have found of what happened to the victims of plague comes from Penrith in 1597-8. Here the greater number of those who perished were interred in a common grave on the fell, and a few in the churchyard and schoolhouse yard or in the gardens of their houses.[31] But at Eaglesfield what we have is not a common grave, or a churchyard or school yard, and there are no houses or gardens anywhere near; while the enclosure award and the geology make it fairly certain that the unenclosed grazings always lay on the Skiddaw Slates east of the village, not on the limestone to the north of it. The hypothesis, I conclude, must stand until some weightier objection to it can be produced.

Now if we are right about the motive underlying the choice of our site for a Viking burial – that in those days (Mr Cowen says 850-950)[32] it was recognized as consecrated ground – then it must have been still in use down to that time or not long before, and this, along with the Viking burial in Brigham churchyard, suggests that the two cemeteries were in use simultaneously at this time, while the long survival of the older of them would seem to carry the implication that it was held in special veneration by a number of the local inhabitants. One wonders if it could have been the traditional place of burial of some prominent local family. We have already noted a number of topographical features suggesting that Eaglesfield was once of local importance, and Professor Barrow has shown that in several instances, of which Hallamshire can be regarded as the most noteworthy in England,[33] a place with an *eccles* name is found to have been the principal church, the *matrix ecclesia,* of an important estate. This at once raises the question whether we can find any pointers indicating that this was so in the case of Eaglesfield. In fact I think we can find some in the township that adjoins it on the south-east, Blindbothel.

The place-name experts felt unable to supply an etymology of this name.[34] They recognized that the first element might be *blaen,* Welsh "top", as in Blindcrake, but could find no feature in the general lie of the land answering to this description. I cannot

agree. I should have thought the quite prominent eminence on which How Farm now stands, NY 116264, would suit very well, and much better than anything in the low-lying township of Blennerhasset. Also surprising in their treatment of this place is the absence of any minor names, for in all the other vills in the large medieval manor of the Five Towns they found plenty. Another farm in the township, in which it should be noted there is today no nucleated settlement, is called Palace How, an odd-looking name on any showing, and odder still when we realise that on the *blaen* hypothesis it is an exact translation of Blindbothel. Professor Barrow has drawn attention to a Bolton, NT 5070, close to an *eccles* name, NT 5169, in Scottish Northumbria, near Haddington.[35] Then we also find here a farm called Threlkeld Leys, suggestive of the former existence of a bond hamlet. It is therefore surely more likely than not that the first element in the township name is indeed *blaen,* and the second, translated "dwelling house, palace", is to be interpreted as recalling the one-time residence in the locality of some local magnate, who along with his dependents worshipped in the *ecclesia* nearby.

In the Celtic lands in early times a church of importance would normally be served, not by a single priest, but by a community of persons dedicated to the religious life and organized on more or less monastic lines. This brings us to another onomastic *curiosum.* Still in Blindbothel, at NY 127277, we see on the map Abbeygate and Abbeygate Bridge. The second element here is presumably Old Norse *gata,* "road", and the meaning one would think would be "road leading to the abbey", as in Corbygates in Alston, "road leading to Corbridge". But in this case the road leads to no known abbey, but only to Eaglesfield. Rather further away, about five miles from Eaglesfield, but still on a road leading there, and still in the ancient parish of Brigham, NY 1729, we find two farms Low Abbey and High Abbey. The name is recorded as "The Abbey" in 1655, but is unexplained. Analogy suggests that the place would be so called from having been on land that once belonged to a monastic house; but no monastic house known to history ever owned land there, or anywhere thereabouts. One is thus tempted to conclude that, as at Abbeygate, the reference is to an establishment, monastic in character, of so early a date that its records have not come down to us.

I conclude this interim report, for it is no more, with some reflections on the findings we have noted. We have been able to assemble from quite a variety of sources, topographical, archaeological, and onomastic, a number of indicators all pointing in the direction of a major centre hereabouts alike of Christian worship and of secular lordship in pre-Anglian Cumberland, with not only a proto-Brigham but a proto-Cockermouth as well. But they are only pointers, not proofs. What seems to be needed now is a follow-up in the shape of a detailed morphological study of the locality. For this purpose it would seem that attention should be concentrated on Blindbothel. It is not that we know all we would like to know about Eaglesfield. To give but one instance, we do not know where the family who took their name from the place resided; no trace of a pele tower has ever been recorded, or of a motte as at Irthington, or of a moated site as in Embleton. The trouble is rather that archaeologically the place is about as unpromising as any where in the county. The reverse is true of Blindbothel. Here I know of no evidence of any significant disturbance of the soil in historical times otherwise than by the plough, and fieldwork and aerial photography might well yield a rich reward. And there is surely scope for deskwork as well; it seems scarcely credible that, alone among the vills of the Five Towns, Blindbothel cannot produce, from the abundant medieval records preserved at Cockermouth, any early forms of its minor names.

Acknowledgements

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References

[1] CW2, lxxi, 288,
[2] AA4, xlv (1967), 197-203
[3] Whellan, 297, and CW1, iii, 343.
[4] CW2, xlviii, 74.
[5] AA4, xxvi (1948), 60-1.
[6] AA4, xlv (1967), 202.
[7] CW2, lxvii, 34.
[8] *EPNS Cumbd.*, 378.
[9] *Ibid*, 355.
[10] CW2, lx, 40-5.
[11] *Jnl. Brit. Archaeol. Assn.*, xxx (1967), 37-46.
[12] CW2, xxxiv, 184, and xlviii, 74.
[13] The acreage figures in this paper have been taken from the first edition of the O.S. 6″ maps and therefore differ sometimes from those to be found in the county histories and other sources.
[14] *Register of the Priory of St. Bees,* Surtees Soc. cxxvi, charter no. 2.
[15] *Ibid.*, nos. 98, 99, 102, 103, 104.
[16] M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson (eds.), *Christianity in Britain, 300-700* (1968), 87-92.
[17] G. W. S. Barrow, *Kingdom of the Scots* (1973), ch. 1, *passim.*
[18] K. Cameron (ed.), *Place-Name Evidence for the Anglo-Saxon Invasion and Scandinavian Settlements* (1975), 6.
[19] *D. & G. Trans.*, 3 ser., xli (1964), 125-34.
[20] *Ibid.*, 127.
[21] *Ibid.*, 132.
[22] *Op. cit.* in note 16, 100.
[23] *Op. cit.* in note 19, fig. 5.
[24] *D. & G. Trans.*, 3 ser., xliii (1966), 84-116.
[25] *Ibid.*, 89.
[26] *Ibid.*, 100.
[27] *Op. cit.*, in note 16, 100-1, citing *The Scotsman,* 4 May 1963.
[28] E. R. Norman and J. K. S. St. Joseph, *The Early Development of Irish Society* (1969). ch. 5.
[29] *Op. cit.* in note 18, 7.
[30] CW2, lxvi, 103-4.
[31] Whellan, 596.
[32] AA4, xlv (1967), 201.
[33] *Op. cit.* in note 17, 19-21.
[34] *EPNS Cumbd.*, 345.
[35] *Op. cit.* in note 17, 35.