

SNY	19 127
ENY	146
CNY	
Parish	4035
Rec'd	2-1-00

4035



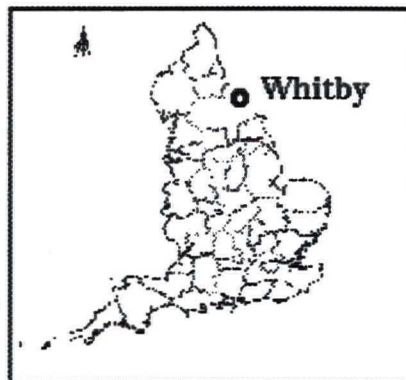
ENGLISH HERITAGE

## Whitby Abbey Headland Project - Southern Anglian E

### UPDATE 3: *End of Excavation (August 1999)*

#### CONTENTS

- **Results of the excavation**
  - The Cemetery  
*(Most recent News)*
  - Other Features
- **Finds**
  - Artefacts
  - Ecofacts
- **Further work**
- **Acknowledgements**



Click on "Whitby" on the map to see a more detailed location plan of the excavation. (65K image)



overhead view of site looking

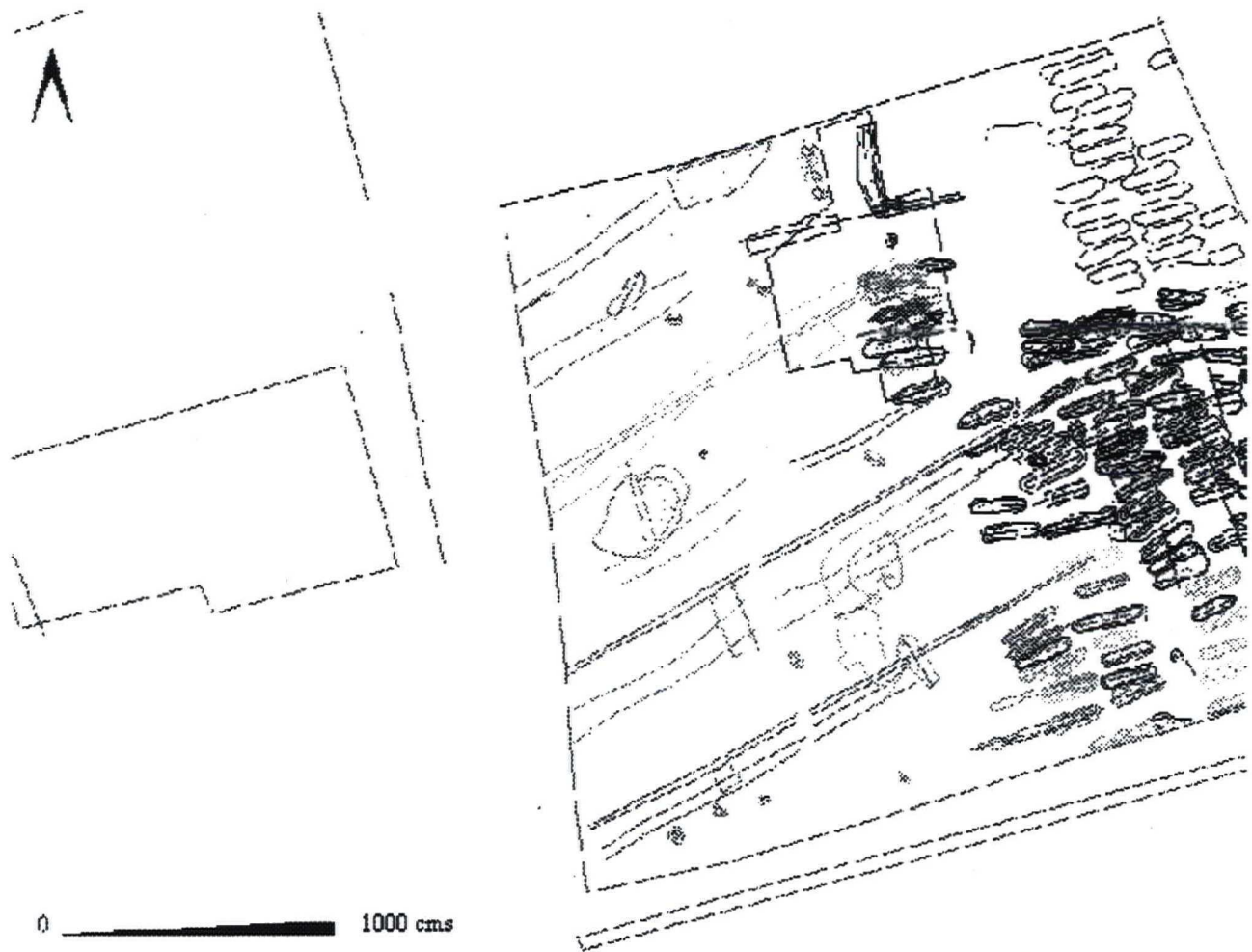
#### RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

The overlying soil, comprising an upper layer of modern topsoil and a lower layer of medieval plough soil, was stripped down to the natural boulder clay by machine under the careful supervision of an archaeologist. Archaeological features, which showed as darker grey-brown patches within the light red-brown boulder clay, appeared at approximately half a metre below the modern ground surface.

Medieval ridge and furrow ploughing has clearly crossed the site, and the remains of several furrows have cut through some of the archaeological features. The direction of the furrows changes, from running east-west, to running on a north-south alignment within the area under excavation

##### *The Cemetery*

The cemetery is considerably larger than was first thought. It has been estimated that, if the burials continue at their present density across the site, at least 200 graves may lie within the current area of excavation. Over 110 graves have now been excavated. The cemetery limits have not yet been established, the graves certainly appear to continue northwards and eastwards, beyond the area of excavation. It is probable that the western edge of the cemetery has been reached, as the lines of graves appear to stop in the centre of Area 1, although no definite boundary feature has been identified. By coincidence, the southern edge of the cemetery appears to run on approximately the same line as the modern field wall.



*Interim plan of excavation area - late July '99: showing distribution of graves and other*

The graves appear to lie in rows, implying that the cemetery was well organised, though no evidence for grave markers, such as crosses or headstones, has yet been identified. At least two phases of burial have been identified, with the later phase of graves in general being shallower than, and set at a slight angle to, the earlier graves. It appears that a stone wall, running on a north-south alignment, may once have divided the cemetery, and several other divisions between grave groups, although not marked by physical boundaries, have been identified. To the west of the wall, although close together, the graves do not appear to intercut one another, while to the north and east they are more densely packed, with later inhumations disturbing earlier ones. It is possible that this wall may once have formed the western boundary to the cemetery, which was then extended at a later date.

The burials all appear to lie on an east-west alignment, with the head at the west end, indicating that they are Christian. The lack of grave goods also supports this theory. So far very little dating evidence has been recovered from the graves. A small coin, called a *sceatta*, dating to c700-740, was recovered from the cemetery area during the evaluation in 1995, and a shroud pin and a glass gaming piece have been found this season, both of which were originally dated to the period between the 7th and 9th centuries AD. On this evidence the cemetery was dated to the Anglian period, associated with the earliest monastery on



period, associated with the earliest monastery on Whitby headland, which was founded by Hilda in 657. However, a glass gaming piece found during this years excavation has been examined by a specialist who has dated this artefact to the late Roman period, the 4th/5th centuries AD. Late Roman pottery has also been recovered from some of the graves, including a complete red-slipped base, possibly from a small beaker. This evidence, coupled with the two phases of burial suggests therefore, that we may have an even more exciting find than was first thought and that there may have been a Christian community on Whitby Abbey headland in the late Roman/sub Roman period. If there was already a history of Christianity on the site this may have been the reason why Hilda established her monastery at Whitby.

Several of the burials show evidence of practices often associated with late Roman inhumations. Two individuals appear to have been decapitated, their heads being placed the wrong way round in the graves, with the jaws pointing away from the bodies. A number of other individuals appear to have been buried face down, with their hands tied behind their backs and possibly their legs tied together at the knees.

One cremation was also found, this appeared to have been placed in a small rectangular box, before being buried on the same east - west alignment as the inhumations. Although cremation was not a common form of burial for Christians it has been noted from other early Christian sites in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, including Thwing.

Although most of the burials appear to have been placed straight into the ground, possibly wrapped in a shroud, evidence for at least six coffins has now been recovered. These seem to have been simple wooden boxes, and where the wood has decayed it has left a stain in the ground around the skeleton. In one case some fragments of the wood had actually survived, despite the acidity of the soil. Metal strapping and coffin furniture has been noted from two of the coffins.

At present it is impossible to tell who was buried here, or how long the cemetery was in use. It may be that this cemetery was continually used for approximately four hundred years, or that there was a hiatus between the possible late Roman Christian and Anglian burials. Further analysis of the bone and the stratigraphic relationships between the graves may answer some of these questions.

Unfortunately the acidic nature of the boulder clay has meant that the skeletons are in a poor state of preservation. The analysis of the human remains from this cemetery will start once the bones reach the *oste archaeologist*. Tests, such as DNA and carbon dating, will, hopefully, answer some of the questions posed by this season of excavation.

#### *Other Features*

A number of post holes have been revealed during the excavation, including a line of three in the south-western corner of the site, and a line of five large post holes on the northern side of the excavated area. None of these contained stones as packing for the post. No dating evidence has been recovered from any of these features.



*Grave 50274: one of the best preserved skeletons*

Possibly the most unexpected discovery from the excavation so far is a pit at the western end of the trench, number [50045], which produced finds of late *Neolithic/early Bronze Age* date, approximately four thousand years ago, (see section on finds in this leaflet). This is the clearest indication so far of the span of human activity on Whitby Headland.

A sinuous linear feature has also been recorded on the site, running on an approximate north - south alignment towards the northern edge of the excavated area. Unfortunately no dating evidence was recovered from the fill of this feature, but it may be prehistoric in date.

## FINDS

The finds from the site are broken down into artefacts (anything made or used by humans, including pottery, ceramic building material, metalwork and clay pipe etc...) and ecofacts (natural materials, including animal bone, marine shell, seeds, insects, such as those recovered from the soil sampling, and indicative of the natural environment). Further information on finds and finds processing can be obtained by reading the leaflet 'Rubbish of the Past'.

### *Artefacts*



*Collard urn*

Few finds have so far been recovered from the site. Several sherds of pottery from a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age collared urn, decorated with rope markings, were recovered from pit [50045]. A saddle quern, used for grinding grain into flour was also found in this feature.



*Using a saddle quern*

*drawing of a collared urn, and of someone using a saddle quern.*

Late Roman artefacts have comprised a small circular glass gaming piece, possibly indicating the number five, from beneath a child's burial, and several sherds of pottery. No complete vessels have been recovered.

Anglian artefacts have comprised a shroud pin from one of the graves and several sherds of pottery. Again no complete vessels were recovered during the excavation.

A single arrow head and a possible blade have also been found in two graves.

The human remains are in a very poor state, most of the bone is badly fragmented, though the teeth appear to survive relatively well. Several of the graves have produced white quartz pebbles of varying sizes, this was noted in the burials uncovered during the evaluation in 1995 and appears to be a rite associated with early Celtic Christianity. The practice has also been recorded in cemeteries in Scotland and Ireland.

### *Ecofacts*

Large animal bones and shells are collected by hand excavation, others are recovered from soil samples taken from the fills of features on the site. The soil samples are then wet sieved through a series of meshes to collect small animal and fish bones, seeds, insect remains, and charcoal. This process will be ongoing during the excavation and further information is available from the display that has been set up in the site finds processing area.

### **FURTHER WORK**

All artefacts, ecofacts, and human remains from the site will be subjected to further analysis by appropriate specialists. This information will give an insight into the past environment of Whitby Headland, and the lives of those who lived here, including what they ate, where their pottery came from and how they utilised the land.

The written and drawn records from the excavation will also be studied and a report on what was found will be prepared.

---

### **Acknowledgements**

Designed and produced by the archaeology branch of English Heritage, Fort Cumberland, Fort Cumberland Rd, Eastney, Portsmouth. PO4 9LD

©English Heritage

---

<a href="#">Top of Page</a>	<a href="#">Archaeology Homepage</a>	<a href="#">WAHP-SAE Home Page</a>
-----------------------------	--------------------------------------	------------------------------------