

ART. V. – *Cartmel, The Earliest Christian Community.*

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THE situation of Cartmel Priory has caused some difficulty in the past. The place name is not appropriate. The two elements of the place name are Old English “ceart” meaning rough sterile soil or rocky ground, modern “chert”; and “mel”, a sandbank (cf. O. Norse “melr” and the Cheshire and Lancashire place name Meols). Ekwall, in his study of the place names of Lancashire, favours the Norse version and explains the name by talking of the rocky ground near the priory site and the sandy bed of the river.¹ There is no sand at Cartmel either in the river or of glacial origin in the valley floor.

There is no doubt about the correctness of the form of the name itself. The 12th-century manuscript of Simeon of Durham, No. 231 calls it “Ceartmel”, and no. 141 calls it “Cartmel”. Domesday Book, 1086, calls it “Cherchebi” and the place is still called “Churchtown” in a 1585 Cartmel Parish Register.

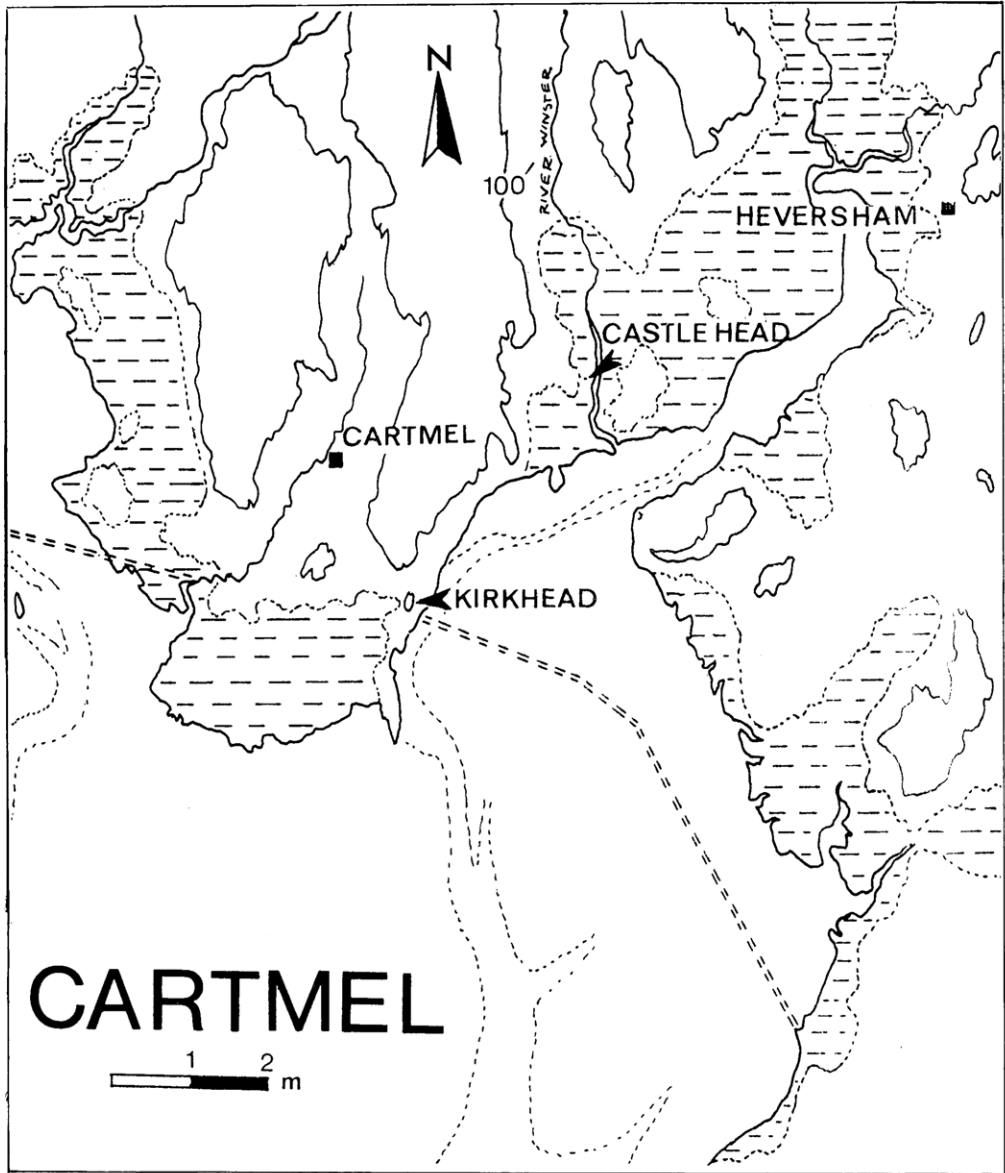
The name “Cherchebi” with its Scandinavian “-by” element is of interest here since the form is O.E. “cirice”, modern “church” and not the Norse form which would have given “kirk”. This implies that the Norse settlers found a thriving church when they arrived as colonists during the 9th century. If this is so, the church would have been Northumbrian.

That Cartmel should have had two names – Cartmel and Churchtown – even in the 16th century is interesting and a little puzzling also. The two earliest forms of the name Cartmel are from the 12th century. Domesday Book is of the 11th century and so, on available evidence, we are left with the conclusion that Churchtown is the original name of the present site. This would explain the place name Cartmel being inappropriate because the original site of the church or monastic settlement of Cartmel has changed its location and has been attached to the present site at Churchtown. There is a precedent for this practice at Abingdon in Oxfordshire, also the site of a famous abbey. Abingdon, or “Abbandun” as it was called in its earliest charters, implies a site on a down or hill slope. The hill slope was perhaps at Boars Hill, about five miles away, and this was the original monastic settlement. The monks moved into the forested lowland and received their foundation charter there but retained the name of the original monastery.²

If this is what occurred, the two names are reasonably explained. If Cherchebi was the original name, then we are looking for a site on rocky sterile ground near a sandbank or on a sandbank where the original church was located.

Just such a site might be at Lindale, three miles to the north-east of Cartmel. Its geography has been severely altered by the embankment of the railway line to Ulverston. The hillock known as Castle Head is on the bank of the river Winster at a point where the river is navigable at high tide, surrounded by Grange Marsh which was once a sandbanked tidal area subsequently reclaimed. In fact, the Winster estuary would have provided the only possible docking point for boats coming up the Kent Estuary which was not left high and dry by the retreating tides or the shifting sands of the main estuary itself.

The place-name is also of interest as it points in a general way to Roman remains.³ Indeed, about 75 Roman coins have been found at this site during the building of the



-  moss
-  carters route

FIG. 1.

eighteenth-century mansion of the Wilkinson family. The antiquarian Henry Barber reports on the discovery:

At Castle Head, near Lindale-in-Cartmel, there is a remarkable isolated round hill, standing at the head of a large tract of land reclaimed from the sea by the embankment of the Ulverston and Lancaster Railway, whence a good view of it may be seen in passing. This rock was adorned by trees and flowering shrubs and ornamental paths when the adjoining mansion was built about ninety years ago, and while the works were in progress many relics of antiquity were found, from which it was conjectured to be a Roman station. Among these relics were parts of a human skull, vertebrae etc.; jaws of a large species of deer; teeth of buffaloes and other animals; tusks of a boar; pieces of limestone, resembling hen's eggs; rings of silver, brass and iron; beads of blue rag stone, lead, clay and glass; 95 sticas of Northumbrian kings; 75 Roman coins; a stone supposed to have been a mould for casting silver rings, iron ore; petrified bone; impressions in clay, pottery or bone etc. It is very likely that this was a Roman-British camp originally, but afterwards occupied by the Norsemen also in their turn.⁴

Another possible site is at Kirkhead, Allithwaite, on the rocky headland which dominates the mosslands which stretch from Allithwaite to Cark and Flookborough. On the summit of the knoll is a tower of uncertain date, but it looks like 15th-century work and would have made a landmark for boats approaching from the sea, and perhaps more important, would have marked the end of the carters' route across the estuary of the Kent to Silverdale. This is still marked as a public right of way on the Ordnance Survey of 1976.

The place name is a combination of O.N. "kirk" and O.E. "Heaford", i.e. "church headland". The Norse settlers apparently found a church here or named it so because it formed part of the church lands. On the south side of the church the ground slopes away to the marshland which separates Kirkhead from Humphrey Head out in the bay. There are terraces on the slope on this side and a possible enclosure bank but there is no trace of such a bank on the north side. The *Victoria County History* mentions the possibility of a church at this site and only excavation will prove the point one way or another.

If there was a church on this site, it is unlikely to have been a Northumbrian or Anglian foundation. Its location is a classic Celtic monastery site and, moreover, a site of the Irish "peregrini" and not the native Celtic population. This is argued more closely below. For the moment we are concerned with the name of the place. Our earliest record of the name Kirkhead is from a 1571 Cartmel Parish Register.

If there was a monastery here, the name Cartmel would be exactly right – the headland is rugged and stony with outcropping limestone in cliffs on the west side and a gentler slope to the estuary shore on the east. The sandbank is the lowest point on the estuary where cart traffic can cross the bay to Silverdale as they have done since the fifteenth century.⁵

At some point before the survey of Domesday Book, this site moved back to the gentle plateau under Newton Fell. I believe we have documentary evidence for this move as well.

From the pen of Simeon of Durham we are told that Cartmel was given by Ecgrith King of Northumbria to St. Cuthbert after his miracle at an unidentified town called "Exanforda". The place was given with all its British population⁶ and with it the town

of "Suð Gedluit" which is also unidentified. The date of this transaction is given as about A.D 688.

We have no reason to doubt this evidence. The political situation at this point is confirmed by what we know of the life of Wilfrid at the end of the 6th century. When Wilfrid recites the record of his administration we are told that he occupied many lands in Northumbria previously occupied by Celtic churches.⁷ Furthermore, the Synod of Whitby in 663 had made those Celtic monasteries which could not accept its decision withdraw to the Celtic kingdoms of Strathclyde or Ireland.⁸

In these circumstances, the donation of Celtic monastic lands to an Anglian saint or bishop is perfectly credible. The fact that our slender documentary sources mention the practice twice is evidence of a highly significant event. It is therefore likely that an original Celtic Irish foundation on the coast was superseded by an Anglian foundation under St. Cuthbert's banner. The site was perhaps moved back into the hinterland at this juncture as had happened at Abingdon. The significant factor here is the land attached to the original foundation. Simeon of Durham specifically mentions Cartmel and a vill at "Suð Gedluit" implying the donation of an estate of some dimension. Both Wilfrid and Cuthbert were involved in the contemporary power struggle between church and state during the latter half of the eighth century. Wilfrid had acquired extensive lands at Ripon, Amounderness and a number of locations mentioned in Eddius' life,⁹ many of which have vanished without trace on our current map. Far from being enclosed self-contained communities, devoted to the original virtues of hard work and relative poverty, these new foundations were on the best lands of the region with extensive holdings – the equivalent of royal estates and administered with the same degree of self-determination and independence.

It is possible therefore that the original estate can be guessed at from the evidence we have so far adduced by place-name study. It is also possible that the later history of the area has bearing on this question too. At Cartmel a substantial holding has been kept intact throughout the early medieval period to emerge as the present parish. The present parish is a slice of land stretching from the sea to the head of the valley of the Eea with Newton Fell and Middle Fell on the east side and the Bigland Fell complex to the west (Fig. 1). The land is good arable with grazing for sheep on both fell sides as well as a suggestion of extensive early cultivation of barley on Bigland Fell since the place-name element O.E. "bygg" is barley. At the sea shore there is the fishing and possibility of trade by sea, and the end of the carters' route across the Kent sands. Inland there were extensive marshlands from Allithwaite to the Out Marsh, now partly occupied by Cark Airfield. The community at Cartmel could thus exploit three resources – farming, wild fowling and hunting, and the sea.¹⁰ The map is an attempt to reconstruct the original shore-line with marshland from the early medieval period. This makes Humphrey Head into an island and Kirkhead into a headland projecting into the sea.¹¹ The parish boundary at Cark follows the line of the original shore for a mile before turning south to cut off Flookborough which may have started its existence at this period as a fishing community. The place-name is comparatively recent and contains the element "fluke" or "flounder".

This parish as it is now was mentioned in Domesday as "Cherchebi" and assessed at six ploughlands. At this time, 1086, it belonged to one Duuan. Walton and Newton on either side were assessed at six ploughlands each and were held by Tostig as part of

Hougun.¹² In 1168 it was a royal estate,¹³ still flanked by two sections of the estates of the Marshall family, Earls of Pembroke who were granted the estate in 1186¹⁴ and William Marshall then gave the three lands, Newton, Cartmel and Walton to the Canons Regular for the foundation of Cartmel Priory.¹⁵

It is significant also that the three districts maintained their separate identity and emerged as Allithwaite, Holker and Broughton in 1332.¹⁶ I suggest that the present parish boundary with its geographical line is more or less the original estate. Where the present boundary deviates from geographical features is land subsequently reclaimed.

It may now be useful to return to the question of an original Celtic monastery. My attention was first drawn to Kirkhead as a classic monastic site on the lines of Heysham or Whithorn or Burry Holms. Steve Dickinson drew my attention to Castle Head in February 1983.¹⁷

It was E. G. Bowen who first set down a list of criteria for monastic settlement patterns of this period, and the sites at Kirkhead or Lindale offer a good parallel to his criteria.¹⁸ They are a long way from the established centres of population in the fifth and sixth century – Lancaster, Kendal and Carlisle – and away from lines of communication by Roman road; even if there was a road down to Dalton in Furness its line would have fallen far to the north. This factor alone makes the site at Kirkhead or Lindale an early one. Later Celtic foundations, judging from Welsh examples, were in or close to major settlements or bond hamlets.¹⁹ Bowen pointed out that many early sites were on estuaries, islands or cliff-tops, and that the monastery moved its location up sheltered valleys and made considerable inroads into the forested land of the valley floor.²⁰ It is therefore possible that the site had already shifted to its upper valley location in the seventh century, and that Cuthbert found a well-established community there.

The evidence for each site in turn is scanty. For the site at Kirkhead, W. G. Collingwood noted that the ruined chapel had a graveyard until the 18th century.²¹ In addition, the place-names would indicate church holdings. Close by is Kirk Heys and from Tudor times – “Kirkepol”.²² In addition, an article in *Barrow Naturalists and Field Club Transactions* in the last century mentions excavations in the cave at Kirkhead. “Some interesting remains of historic and pre-historic times” were collected by one J. P. Morris.²³ Whatever was found has vanished without trace.

For Lindale, the report of finds at Castle Head is more promising, including as it does, Roman coins, Anglo-Saxon coins, evidence of metalwork and, above all, the limestone pebbles “resembling hen’s eggs”.

These white pebbles are found in early Christian graves on the Isle of Man,²⁴ in the Solway Estuary,²⁵ and connected with Holy Wells in North Wales.²⁶ They are certainly linked with early Irish churches.²⁷ To me, they are conclusive evidence of an early Christian, Celtic community.²⁸

There is another interesting feature of the description of King Egfrith’s gift to St. Cuthbert. The site is mentioned as having been given together with all the British there. I don’t think it is necessary to interpret this as meaning that the area was an area of significant British survival.²⁹ The statement may well have meant that a British community of monks was being presented to St. Cuthbert for reform and reconstitution in the light of the Synod of Whitby and to add an extensive and already developed estate to his holdings in the Northumbrian kingdom.

If this is what indeed happened, Cuthbert would have altered the dedication of the

monastery. The present dedication of the Priory Church is to St. Mary, but the original dedication was to St. Michael.³⁰ This form of dedication is often early as at St. Michael's on Wyre in Amounderness which is mentioned as "Michelecherche" in the Domesday Book and the dedication of St. Michael's at Kirkham close by. I don't think we have enough evidence of an early dedication here to press the point, but it adds a little more weight to the total evidence that has accumulated.

Notes and References

- ¹ Ekwall, E., *Place Names of Lancashire* (1922), Chetham Society.
- ² B. M. Cotton. Vitellius A xiii gives the account of the first foundation. Cramp, R., in *Anglo Saxon Archaeology*, ed. D. M. Wilson (1976).
- ³ Dickinson, J. C., *The Land of Cartmel* (1980), 4.
- ⁴ Barker, H., *Furness and Cartmel Notes* (1894), 31.
- ⁵ *V.C.H. Cumberland*, viii, 257.
- ⁶ Simeon of Durham, Rolls Series 1200. *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, "dedit ei cartmel et omnes Britanni cum ea et villam eam quae vocatur sud gedluyt".
- ⁷ Eddius *Vita Wilfridi*, xvii, "enumerans regiones quas ante reges . . . illi dederunt . . . necnon et ea loca sancta in diversis regionibus quae clerus Britannum aciem gladii hostilis manu gentis nostrae fugiens deseruit . . .".
- ⁸ Bede, *Historia*, II.2, Hardinge, L., *The Celtic Church in Britain* (1972), ch. vii. There was still some difficulty over accepting this date for Easter in Wales. *Brut y Twysog* A.D. 717 mentions a church at "Lawn Vihagel" consecrated to St. Michael (i.e. after a Roman practice) and A.D. 768 (?) the *Annales Cambriae* announce "cccxxiv. Annus. Pascha commenatur apud Brittones emendante Elbodugo homine dei".
- ⁹ Eddius, *Vita Wilfridi*, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁰ Coles, J., 'The Concave Landscape' in *Rural Settlement and Land Use* (1977) B.A.R. This discussion of the Somerset levels and the surrounding higher land is a good summary of the pattern of settlement which demands more means of livelihood than one.
- ¹¹ That the shore-line was higher in the Roman period is discussed in Jones, G. D. B., 'Archaeology and Coastal Change'. *Soc. of Antiquaries* (1979).
- ¹² *V.C.H. Cumberland*, viii, 254ff.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Steve Dickinson of 'Search'. Personal communication.
- ¹⁸ Bowen, E. G., *Saints, Seaways and Settlements in the Celtic Lands* (Cardiff, 1969), 196.
- ¹⁹ Jones, G. R. J., in *Advancements of Science*, xv, No. 60 (1959), 341-2.
- ²⁰ Bowen, E. G., *op. cit.*, 212, 213.
- ²¹ Collingwood, W. G., 'The Angles in Furness and Cartmel', CW2, xxiv, 288.
- ²² Stockdale, H., *Annals of Cartmel* (1872), 505.
- ²³ *B.N.F.C.*, Vol. IV (1883-90), 50.
- ²⁴ Kermode, P. M. C. (ed.), *The Manx Archaeological Survey* (1968). Vol. I, 13.
- ²⁵ Crowe, C. J., 'An Excavation at Ruthwell, Dumfries, 1980' (Pending publication).
- ²⁶ Jones, F., *The Holy Wells of Wales* (1954), 96.
- ²⁷ Pochin, Mold, D. *The Monasteries of Ireland* (1976), 21-3.
- ²⁸ Crowe, C. J., 'A Note on White Quartz Pebbles Found in Early Christian Contexts on the Isle of Man'. *Proc. Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society*. Vol. viii, No. 4 (1982), 413-15.
- ²⁹ Ekwall, E. *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (1922), Chetham Society. Chap. 'The British Elements'. The place name 'Walton' indicates substantial Anglo-Saxon holdings and that a British settlement was remarkable in this context.
- ³⁰ *V.C.H. Cumberland*, viii, 254ff. and ii, 143.