

## X

### AN EARLY CEMETERY AT TYNEMOUTH

*Barbara Harbottle*

ON A number of occasions human bones have been discovered lying under Front Street, Tynemouth (NZ 370 694). In 1852 it was reported that "A large quantity of human bones (including skulls with the teeth entire), have been found by the workmen making trenches for the water-pipes in the Front Street, within a short distance of the castle gates. Some years ago, whilst foundations for new house were being laid in the same locality, a quantity of human bones were found, and boots and spurs with them, as though the victims of war had been interred where they fell".<sup>1</sup> There were further finds in 1951,<sup>2</sup> on the north side of the street in 1974,<sup>3</sup> and most recently in 1976 on the south side. On this last occasion the digging of a trench for a new water main uncovered bones lying 1½ to 2 feet below the pavement in front of nos. 54 to 60.

While these skeletal remains leave us in no doubt that beneath Front Street there is a cemetery the problem has always been its date, and since the cemetery and street cannot exist at the same time burials must have ceased before the street was laid out. A date for the bones was thus essential if the history of Tynemouth was to be elucidated further, and I am grateful to Mr. Milburn Preston for despatching a sample for radiocarbon analysis, which was paid for by Tyne and Wear County Council. This produced a conventional radiocarbon date of a.d. 1100 ± 90 (HAR-1870; 850 ± 90 B.P.) or, after calibration, A.D. 1170.<sup>4</sup>

A date so long after the Conquest came as a surprise. It had hitherto been assumed that the priory and castle, both late 11th-century in origin, had been not only the cause of the foundation of Tynemouth but also determinants of its plan. This could still be so since the earliest reference to Tynemouth as a settlement is also remarkably late, 1189,<sup>5</sup> but it does beg the question of how quickly the existence of a graveyard would be forgotten, or of how soon men would be willing to build over one which they remembered.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 2 April 1852. I am grateful to my colleague, Mr. A. G. Chamberlain, for this reference.

<sup>2</sup> Information from the pathologist's report, 23 July 1952, a copy of which was sent to the then Tynemouth Borough Surveyor and shown to me by Mr. M. Preston.

<sup>3</sup> *The Journal*, 31 January 1974.

<sup>4</sup> R. M. Clark, "A calibration curve for radiocarbon dates", *Antiquity*, XLIX (1975), fig. 1 and table 8.

<sup>5</sup> W. S. Gibson, *The History of the Monastery of Tynemouth*, Vol. I (1846), p. 61.

