

A medieval chapel and post-medieval burials at Saint Ebba's Chapel, Beadnell, Northumberland

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SUMMARY

Saint Ebba's Chapel, set on a small coastal promontory to the south-east of Beadnell, was first investigated in 1853 when it was shown to comprise a chancel and nave with a western division, the doorway architecture indicating a c. 12th-century date.

Investigations by Time Team demonstrated that the chapel was originally constructed as a single cell with a later extension to the east, although no dating evidence for either structure was recovered. Radiocarbon analysis of human bone samples from the surrounding small cemetery shows that it continued to be used for burial beyond the late 17th-century date of the last recorded interment. The small mound to the east of the chapel contained predominantly foetal/neonatal remains buried in the 16th–early 17th centuries. In its later stages the chapel environs may have functioned as the burial place of unbaptised infants and other individuals otherwise excluded from the parish graveyard.

INTRODUCTION

IN JUNE 2011, a three day archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Channel 4's *Time Team* at Saint Ebba's Chapel, Beadnell, Northumberland (NGR 423905 628701; Wessex Archaeology 2013). Located on a limestone promontory, which lies at a height of c. 9 m OD, south-east of Beadnell village, approximately 10 miles (16 km) north-east of Alnwick and 5 miles (8 km) south-east of Bamburgh (fig. 1), the chapel (Scheduled Monument 25055) had been placed on the 'Heritage at Risk Register' as 'declining' due to sustained visitor and coastal erosion.

The principal aims of the investigation were to gain a better understanding of the chronology whilst examining the extent and condition of the features and deposits associated with the chapel, and the spatial and functional relationships between them. This was to include the identification of burial remains likely to be associated with the earliest phase of use to enable sampling for radiocarbon analysis. The impact of various erosive mechanisms was also to be assessed to assist in the future management of the site. To this end a programme of archaeological investigations was proposed, comprising cartographic and documentary analysis, geophysical and landscape survey, and targeted archaeological trenching.

Five evaluation trenches were located to address the research objectives (fig. 1). Trench 1 was located within the structure of the chapel, in an area previously excavated by Mr Hodgson-Hinde in 1853, to investigate construction and chronology. Trench 2 was placed on the northern cliff face to assess the deposits currently under erosive pressure from the sea and wind. Trench 3 was situated close to the location of the south door of the chapel where the remains of two *in situ* burials were reportedly found in the 19th-century excavations (Tate 1863, 109). Trench 4 was placed to investigate human bone visible at surface level in the modern footpath to the north of the chapel. Trench 5 focused on a small mound to the east of the chapel which it was believed may have been the location of a cross or earlier chapel.

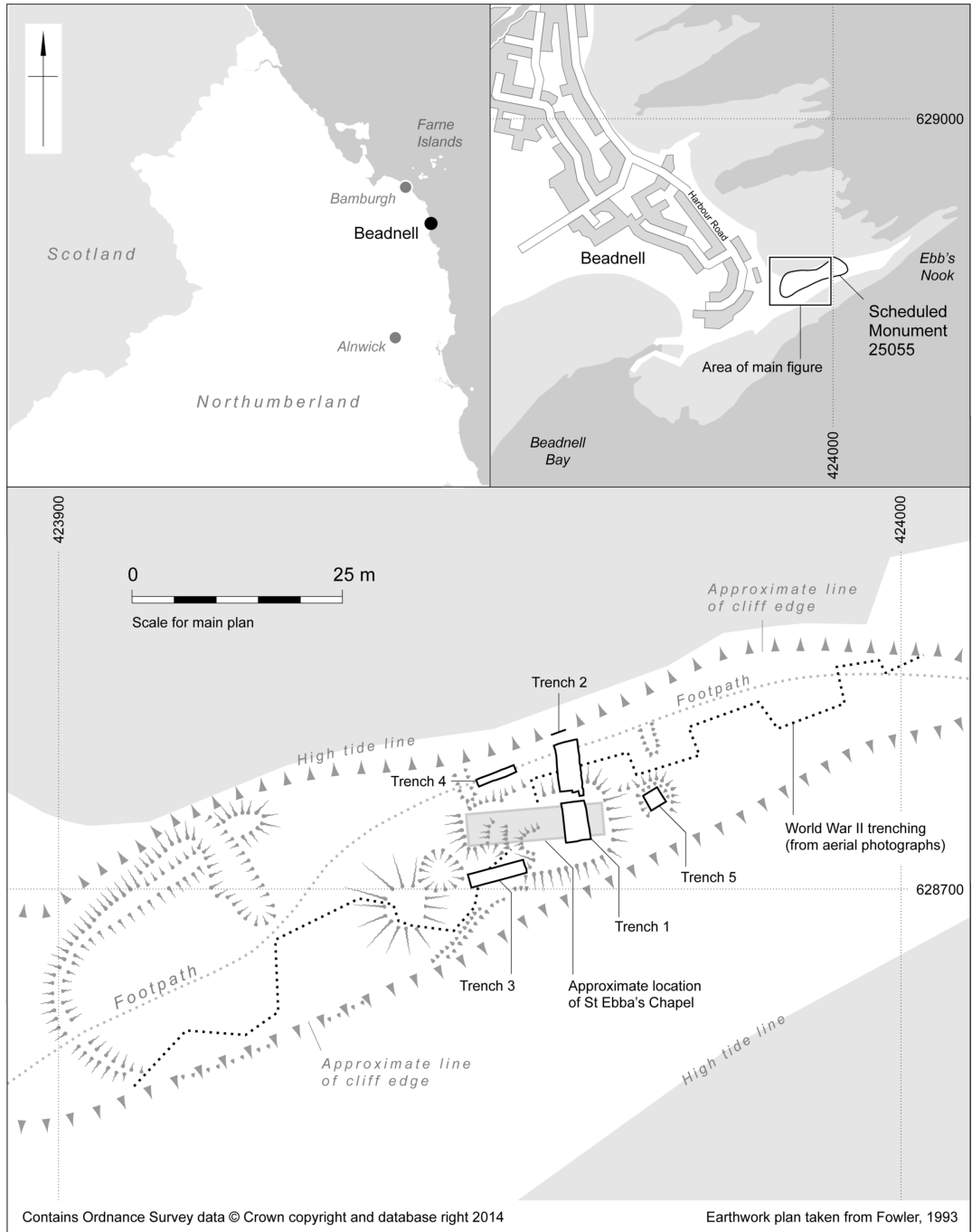


Fig. 1 Site and trench location plans; showing position of Scheduled Monument area, limit of previously recorded earthworks (after Fowler 1993), and location of World War II trenches (from aerial photographs).

Only those *in situ* burial remains in immediate danger of erosion/destruction were lifted (119, 406, 403). All the human remains exposed were subject to on-site assessment by the writer (for methodology see the on-line evaluation report: Wessex Archaeology 2013, 12). *In situ* bone from four graves (130, 313, 402 and 507) was sampled for radiocarbon dating. The disarticulated bone lifted during the investigations was subsequently reburied within the confines of the chapel (Trench 1).

SITE BACKGROUND

Coastal inter-visibility was a key factor for early Christian sites in this part of Northumberland. The headland of Ebb's Nook is highly visible and has open views along the coast — Lindisfarne and Bamburgh, the medieval spiritual and administrative centres for Northumberland lie to the north — and out to sea, including the nearby Farne Islands, home of St Cuthbert's hermitage. The promontory is also isolated, a potential requisite for the location of an early medieval chapel (Fowler 1993). The potential links between the chapel and Saint Ebba, sister of the 7th-century kings of Northumbria and abbess of one of the several religious houses she is attributed with founding, have been rehearsed elsewhere (Way 1854; Tate 1863; Bateson 1893). Currently, however, there is no tangible evidence for a 7th-century foundation for the chapel and it has generally been regarded as 13th century or later (Fowler 1993), the earliest written reference to Beadnell being in 1161 when it was held by the manor of Bamburgh.

The chapel remains were first investigated in 1853 by Hodgson-Hinde, whose findings were reported by Albert Way (1854); the latter's notes and ground-plan forming the basis of all subsequent descriptions (Tate 1863; Bateson 1893; Fowler 1993). The 19th-century excavations — which seem to have comprised the removal of windblown sand — revealed the rubble-walled chancel and nave with a later addition at the west end (total outer wall dimensions 16.8 × 4.9 m). The west end of the nave featured opposing north and south doors, the surviving architecture of the former indicating it to be no earlier than 12th century. Tate (1863, 108) recorded the walls to chiefly comprise 'yellow magnesian limestone' with some sandstone including the door jambs. Internal features included a coarse rubble-work altar; a small 'bason' set against the south wall of the chancel; a cavity for a piscina in the south-east corner of the nave; a 'low stone bench' which ran along much of the north and south sides of the nave; and a stone basin (?font) found adjacent to the south door. All but the 'bench' and piscina appear to have been lost or destroyed within a few years of the chapel being excavated (Tate 1863, 109). The frequent recovery of slates among the ruins demonstrated the nature of the roof. No dating evidence was recorded other than that suggested by the architecture of the doorway.

An earthwork survey and assessment of the site in 1992 identified a previously unmarked rectangular stony earthwork to the east of the chapel (3 × 4 m; location of Trench 5), thought to be the remains of an earlier building set on a slightly different alignment (Fowler 1993). This, together with the north wall of the chapel, form the south side of a 22 × 13 m walled enclosure, the east and west sides comprising low rubble walls extending to the northern cliff face (fig. 1; western arm crossed by Trench 4). This complex is situated at the east end of a larger enclosure (55 × 25 m), the perimeter of which is formed by an earth bank (1–2 m wide, maximum height 1 m) cutting off the promontory at the western, landward end. Bounding the promontory on the west and north-east sides, the bank is thought to have

continued along the south side but has been lost to cliff-edge erosion. Other adjacent earthworks were considered to pre-date the chapel and provide evidence for an earlier monastic site, with the chapel situated at the centre of the complex.

The last recorded burial took place in the grounds of Saint Ebba's Chapel in 1679 (Bateson 1893, 322; Fowler 1993, 46). Tate (1863, 109) noted that human remains were occasionally brought to the surface by rabbits (location not given) but that the only known grave locations were those adjacent to the south door of the chapel. A map of 1707 apparently marked the position of the chapel with a cross standing close beside (Bateson 1893, 322) although its exact location is uncertain. The present parish church of Saint Ebba was built *c.* 1746, the associated burial ground presumably commenced to function as such at the same time.

Excavations in 1994 to the east of the chapel uncovered a well-preserved lime kiln dated archaeomagnetically to the late 15th–early 16th century (Hardie 1994; Williams and Goodrick 1994; Geoquest 1995; Williams and Williams 1996). The remains of the chapel and its graveyard were badly disturbed by World War II sea and air defences comprising large trenches cut to accommodate watchmen and riflemen protecting the coastline (fig. 1). Trial excavations in 1993 suggested that the cross-wall between the nave and chancel had been robbed subsequent to the 19th-century investigations, that the interior of the chapel had been used during World War II probably causing damage to the walls, and that the current infill had accumulated subsequent to that use (Williams and Goodrick 1994).

RESULTS

The Chapel

The north, south (both 1.5 m wide) and east (0.60 m wide) walls of the original single-celled chapel were exposed in Trench 1 (104), cut into the natural sandy clay and describing a 2.8 m wide area (fig. 2). Constructed from roughly-hewn sandstone blocks (most identified as limestone by Tate 1863, 108) which increased in size towards the base, the irregular-coursed walls (maximum surviving height 2.2 m; average six courses) were bonded using a soft pea-grit, lime and charcoal mortar, and had a rubble and mortar core (fig. 3). What appeared to comprise the wall foundation extended out by a further 0.5–1 m, along the exposed length of the south wall but only part-way along the north side ending about 1 m from the eastern cross wall. The location of this 'foundation wall' closely corresponds with the 'benches' shown in Way's 19th-century ground plan (1854; Fowler 1993, fig. 1). Formed of large blocks, apparently integral to the wall on the south side at least, this wall level could have formed a dual function; if so, the very shallow height difference (approx. 0.10 m) between the wall and the later floor level (141) suggests it is unlikely to have functioned as a 'bench' in the later stage of the chapel's use (figs. 2 and 3; see below). Alternatively, at some stage in its use, this lower wall level might have formed a supporting lip for an internal floor. The location of the cavity in the wall for the piscina, mentioned by Tate in 1863 as surviving in the south wall, would have fallen approximately 0.46 m to the west of the north–south wall (original east wall) seen in fig. 2. No trace of this feature was observed within the south wall (104), which survived to only two courses above the height of the 'bench' in the relevant area (fig. 3).

A sondage excavated on the north side of the north wall showed no outer 'face' suggesting it had been lost or de-faced; alternatively, the building might have been built back into the rising ground or had a turf wall on this less exposed side. There was no erosion to the outer

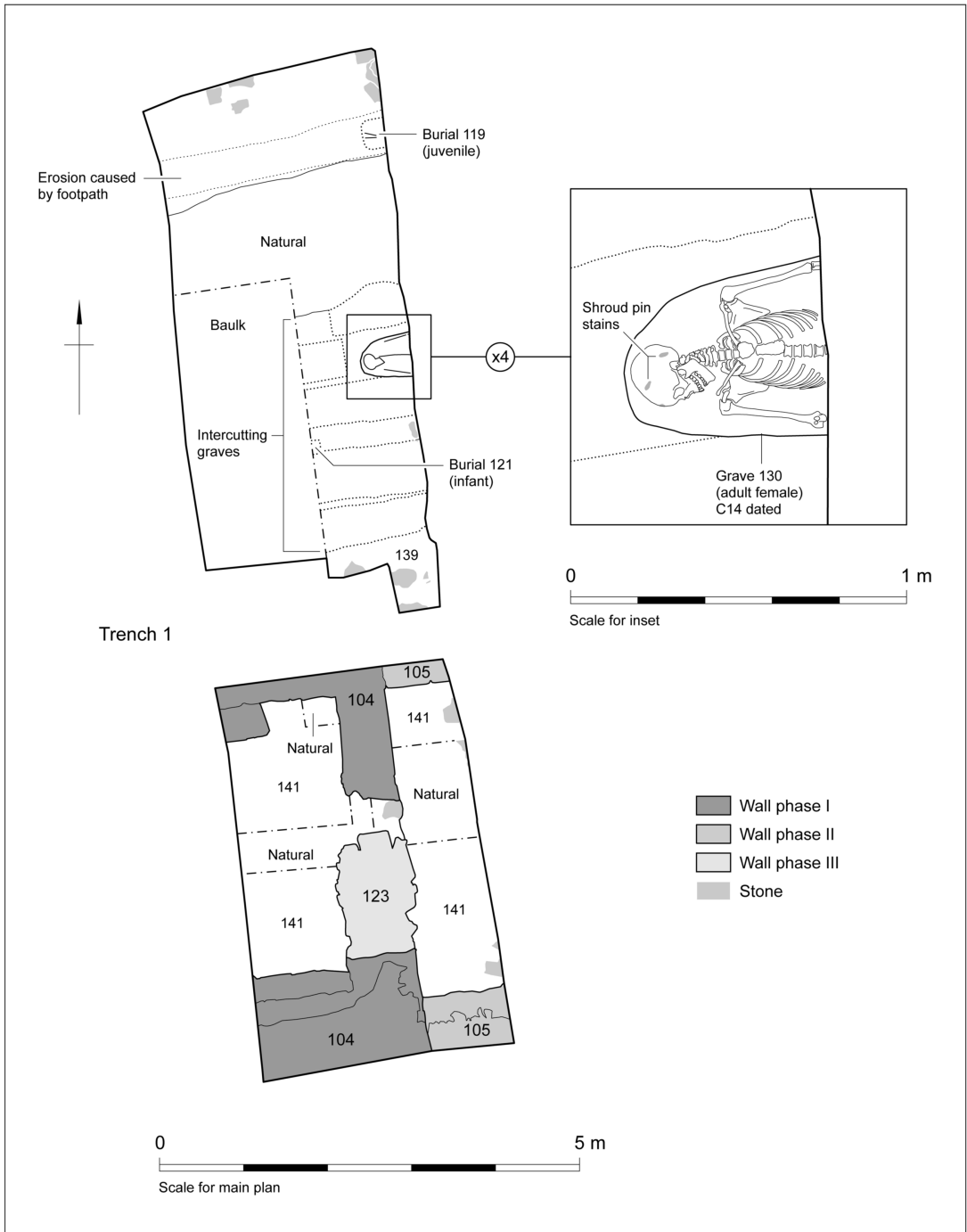


Fig. 2 Trench 1; showing chapel walls and grave locations, with detail of burial remains within grave 130.



Fig. 3 Interior of the chapel from the west showing the original chapel walls (104), entrance cut through the east wall with 19th-century blocking (123) and the extension to the east (105). Sondages cut through floor layers to the underlying natural.

face of the narrow east wall, though this may have been due to the protection offered by the later extension.

The extension, of similar construction (105), was added to the east at an unknown date and accessed via a doorway created by the removal of the central segment of the original east wall. Here the bonding comprised a sandy clay, but remnants of mortar on some stones suggests elements of the original walling were reused. The original floor level appears to have been removed and a trampled foundation level established to take the (sandy clay) earth floor of the extended chapel (141). Way's 1854 plan shows this eastern extension as part of a single build with the main body of the chapel to the west, but the current investigations clearly show walls of the eastern extension butting those of the main structure.

At some stage, apparently post-dating the 19th-century investigations, the gap in the chancel wall was in-filled with reused rubble (123) and bonded with a cement-based mortar which was also found over some of the walls, presumably in an effort to consolidate the deteriorating chapel (Williams and Goodrick (1994) observed that there was no gap in the wall in 1993).

Finds of a few stone roof tiles from Trenches 1 and 3, and an unstratified small carved architectural fragment, probably all derive from the original chapel structure. Ceramic pan-tiles (17th century or later) and a small fragment of lead window came from the same areas and may also be related but must pertain to a later phase. Domestic refuse (19th- to 20th-century pottery and bottle glass) recovered from around the chapel walls is probably associated with the 19th-century excavations and possibly to the use of the area in World War II.

Burial Remains

All or parts of a minimum of 22 inhumation graves were revealed, twelve of which were subject to some level of investigation. The majority lay to the north and west of the chapel (Trenches 1, 3 and 4) and were orientated roughly east-west, parallel with the peninsula (figs. 2 and 4). The graves found in the mound to the east of the chapel (Trench 5) lay rather more NE-SW. Burial position was supine and extended, mostly on a west-east (or SW-NE) orientation but with some variations in Trench 1 and 5 (one east-west and one NE-SW).

There was frequent intercutting between graves and post-depositional disturbance by a variety of mechanisms. In Trench 1, grave definition was blurred by bioturbation and reworking of the cemetery soil, rendering the dimensions and relationships of the potential eleven graves uncertain (fig. 2). A slot excavated within the area described by the stone 'tumble' (305) in Trench 3 revealed a series of four intercutting graves surviving to a maximum depth of 1 m below ground level (fig. 4). In Trench 4, the grave (402) of a young adult female (c. 23-25 yr.) cut that of a young infant (c. 10-12 mth.; grave 405) to the north of it, and the redeposited remains of a second infant (c. 9-12 mth.) within the adult's grave were testament to further disturbance. In Trench 5, removal of the topsoil revealed the shallow graves (503, 505, 507, 509 and 510) of at least five foetal/neonatal individuals, and tentative investigation demonstrated that further burials of young infants lay within the sandy soils of the mound, from which redeposited bone was also recovered.

In all, human bone was recovered from 28 contexts spread across all five trenches. Most of the redeposited bone (all/parts >200 skeletal elements) was recovered from the upper levels inside and to the north of the chapel, though some was found in grave fills and the cemetery soil in all areas (see Appendix I, Wessex Archaeology 2013 on-line report for details). Within the chapel these layers may have partly comprised backfill from the mid-19th-century antiquarian diggings within and possibly (to a lesser degree) to the south of the structure, at which time the buildings were buried under windblown sand (Way 1854; Fowler 1993). No human remains appear to have been discovered inside the chapel during the antiquarian investigations, but there are records to the effect that burial remains were observed 'near to the south door of the chapel' (Tate 1863, 109). Further disturbance occurred both within and to the north of the chapel during World War II. Consequently, the precise origin of this redeposited material is unclear, but it is likely to have been within the immediate vicinity of the chapel itself. The disturbed fill of the uppermost grave (309) in Trench 3 also appears to be related to the antiquarian investigations and is in the vicinity of the burials observed 'near to the south door' (Tate 1863, 109).

A further erosive mechanism was demonstrated in Trenches 1 and 4, both of which were crossed by the modern footpath. In each case the surviving burial remains lay c. 10 mm below the surface, the skull and foot bones of the adult female in grave 402 (figs. 4 and 5) and all except the foot bones of burial 119 (juvenile c. 6-7 yr.; no grave cut was discernible; fig. 2) having been destroyed by the passage of modern feet.

No grave goods were recovered, but copper-alloy stains on the skull vault of the young adult female from grave 130 (fig. 2) suggest either she was shrouded or had pinned burial clothes (cap) or a face cloth.

In the absence of artefactual dating evidence, bone samples from four graves were submitted for radiocarbon analysis: grave 130 to the north of the chapel; grave 313, the earliest in the sequence of four graves found in Trench 3; grave 402 towards the northern cliff edge; and

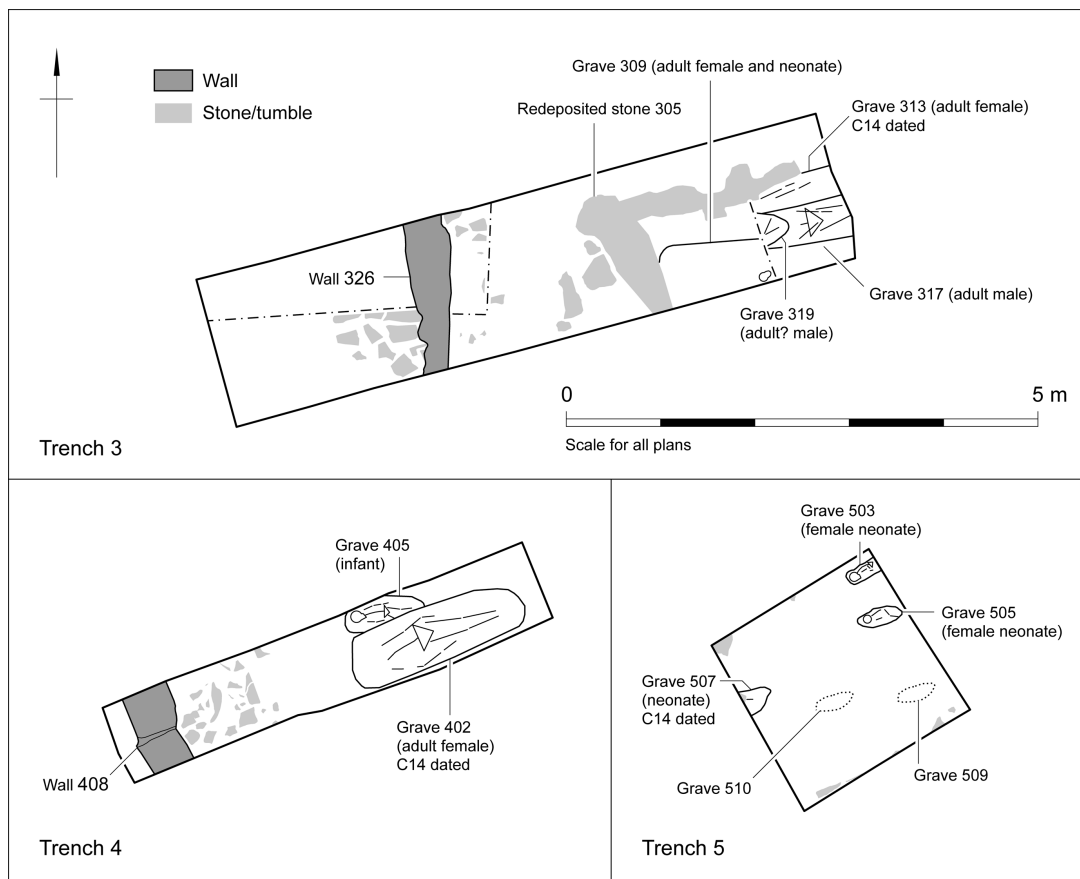


Fig. 4 Trenches 3–5: showing west wall of cemetery and grave locations.

grave 507 from the mound to the east. The latter probably dates from the 16th century, or less likely the early 17th, and indicates that the mound was employed for the burial of new-borns and very young infants prior to the use of the rest of the cemetery for which we currently have evidence (Table 1). Of the other three, two are likely be of 18th-century date, with grave 313 representing the latest and probably dating to the 19th century, presumably the early part and pre-dating Hodgson-Hinde's investigations in the area.

The temporal link between the chapel and the burial remains found to the north in Trench 1 is unclear, but at least some of the potential eleven graves identified in that area had cut through a layer of redeposited natural (139) containing collapsed building materials, suggesting the chapel had fallen out of use before the burials were made.

The remains of a minimum of 29 individuals (MNI) were observed, comprising 21 (72%) immature individuals and eight (28%) adults (see Human Bone report in the Wessex Archaeology 2013 on-line report for methods). The majority of the immature (<18yr.) individuals were less than a year old (55% assemblage); the numbers included four fetuses which had not reached full term, the youngest of which was only *c.* 17–21 weeks. It was not possible to suggest a close age range for all of the adults, but the numbers included two young adults



Fig. 5 Grave 402 with *in situ* burial remains, from the south-west.

Table 1 Radiocarbon determination for samples from four inhumation burials (IntCal09)

Grave	Trench	Material	Lab Code	Uncalibrated date BP	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ‰	$\delta^{15}\text{N}$ ‰	C:N ratio	Calibrated Date (95.4% probability) cal AD
130	1	right humerus	SUERC-35367	190±30 BP	-19.1	11.3	3.3	1650–1690 (22.3%) 1730–1820 (53.5%) 1910–1960 (19.6%)
313	3	right tibia	SUERC-35366	120±30 BP	-20.4	9.0	3.2	1670–1770 (32.4%) 1770–1780 (0.4%) 1800–1940 (62.6%)
402	4	left tibia	SUERC-35364	185±30 BP	-19.6	11.1	3.3	1650–1700 (20.8%) 1720–1820 (53.3%) 1830–1870 (1.7%) 1910–1955 (19.6%)
507	5	left humerus	SUERC-35365	285±30 BP	-19.7	13.2	3.6	1490–1670 (94.7%) 1780–1800 (0.7%)

(18–20 years; minimum one female), one female of 23–35 years, and two individuals over 35 years of age (including at least one male). Similar numbers of males (four) and females (three) were identified.

Cemetery Wall

Remnants of what probably comprised a western perimeter wall to the cemetery/chapel complex were observed in Trenches 3 and 4 (326 and 408, fig. 4). Of similar randomly-coursed sandstone construction and on the same north–south alignment, tumble from both sections was found across the respective trenches. In Trench 3, the graves were overlain by a buried soil similar to that found elsewhere on the site and which post-dated the wall's construction, the latter being extant when the burials were made.

Post-burial Activity

Although the large stones in rough alignment in Trench 3 (305) initially appeared structural they were, in fact, loose within the buried soil containing demolition debris and appear likely to relate to the 19th-century archaeological investigations, derived from the chapel and wall (326) to the east. Depositions of windblown sand and the development of stabilisation layers occurred in both areas at various times, to be re-worked by digging during the 19th century archaeological investigations and the construction of the World War II defensive trenches.

DISCUSSION

Although the burial assemblage clearly represents only a sample of the cemetery population, the proportion of immature individuals recorded is unusually high. The material recovered could have been skewed in favour of these young individuals due to their commonly observed deposition in relatively shallow graves. Only a very shallow depth of stratigraphy could be investigated in Trench 5 due to the density of neonatal remains, which could not be disturbed, and the 'mound' of sand in which they were buried may contain the remains of older individuals at a greater depth. Not all the adults in the cemetery had been buried in deeper graves, however; although a shallow 'hollow-way' had been created by the footpath north of the chapel, the adult female in grave 402 must still have been buried relatively close to the surface.

On the basis of the available data, the proportion of immature individuals is considerably higher than that noted in most other archaeologically recorded cemetery populations. Other post-medieval cemeteries (1550–mid-19th century) subject to archaeological analysis have been found to comprise 9–30% immature individuals with the exception of one mid-19th-century London cemetery with 70% (McKinley 2008, table 17). The rate is also above the c. 50% of deaths of those below the age of 20 years shown in the London Bills of Mortality for the early 18th century (Roberts and Cox 2003, 303–4, table 6.5). Whilst this may indicate an abnormally high mortality rate amongst infants in the locality of Beadnell, it seems improbable that they would suffer to a greater extent than children born and living in the teeming urban environment of 18th-century London. Rather than reflecting the infant mortality rate as such, the high numbers may be related to the location and date of the burials, and reveal the nature of the cemetery in which they lay.

The date of the excavated burials, established by radiocarbon analysis, was later than had been anticipated. The last recorded burial had been made in 1679 (Fowler 1993) — though there is some evidence to suggest it was the late 18th century before a replacement chapel was erected in the village (presumably with its own burial ground; Way 1854). Two, not necessarily mutually exclusive, explanations may exist: some/all of the villagers could have continued to bury their dead in the old chapel burial ground without formal recognition of the fact (particularly if they already had relatives buried there); and/or those buried there may represent individuals who were excluded from the Parish churchyard for some reason.

The mound to the east of the chapel appeared to contain almost exclusively the remains of foetuses/neonates, probably all buried in the 16th–17th century, but the burial of such young individuals was not limited to this area. The immature assemblage includes the remains from a very young foetus (c. 17–21 weeks gestation) redeposited in Trench 1 together with remains from a minimum of four other foetal/neonatal individuals and adults; the presence of this bone suggests this very premature and presumably still-born baby was afforded burial within the same area of the cemetery as other community members. The overall assemblage includes a number of individuals who may have suffered the same fate, being still-born or dying very shortly after birth.

Those dying un-christened were often excluded from the Parish cemetery or relegated to a specific area within it (Daniell 1997, 127–8; Roberts and Cox 2003, 316–8), the latter being a practice which can be seen to continue to the present day in some cemeteries (Scott 1999, 26). It has been suggested that some early medieval cemeteries in England and Wales continued to be used for the burial of young infants after their abandonment for burial of other community members (Craig-Atkins 2014). Deserted churchyards and the seashore are amongst two of the locations that were considered appropriate burial grounds for those excluded from formal active churchyards in post-medieval Ireland (Donnelly and Murphy 2008). These locations, known as *cillíní*, were traditionally associated with the burial of unbaptised infants, but may also have been used for other classes of individual including the shipwrecked, strangers, suicides and the mentally disabled. It may be that the burial ground attached to the deserted chapel of Saint Ebba represents an example of a similar type of burial ground, for which, as yet, there is little published evidence from England for this post-medieval period.

Suggestions of an early Christian chapel here have not been discounted. The chapel is within the sphere of several important early Christian sites and its form and development is similar to chapels found in the Hebrides and more locally on the Farne Islands (Fowler 1993). Earlier survey (Fowler 1993) recorded the chapel standing at the centre of a series of earthworks, possibly representing a monastic complex, the western boundary of which may have been marked by the wall recorded in Trenches 3 and 4 (326 and 408).

The observed structures suggest that the nave and chancel were not, as previously thought, of single construction, but that the latter was added to the main building. It has not been possible to identify a construction date for the chapel or its later extensions. It has, however, been demonstrated that even after the chapel had ceased to function as a place of worship it continued to act as a focus for burial throughout the 18th and into the early 19th century.

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The project archive has been deposited with the Great North Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne under the project code 77504.

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