

# Excavations at Whitton, Lincolnshire

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Excavators from the Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield have recently excavated an extensive cemetery of late 7th- to early 9th-century date in a garden about 50 metres east of the parish church of Whitton in north Lincolnshire (Hadley 2001). The remains of at least 50 individuals have been uncovered, and there were undoubtedly many more in the areas between the trenches that were not accessible for investigation. The cemetery served a mixed lay population of adult males and females of all ages, juveniles and infants. Some individuals were buried within oak coffins with iron fittings. However, the intercutting and overlaying of burials in some parts of the cemetery suggests that other burials were not placed in coffins, and the tight configuration of bones may indicate that some individuals were placed in the ground in shrouds, although confirmatory evidence in the form of shroud pins was not forthcoming. Radiocarbon dating of material excavated in 2001 produced the following date ranges:

Kjølbye-Biddle 1995; Hall and Whyman 1996, 99-113). The parish church of Whitton cannot be dated to any earlier than the 11th century on the basis of its fabric, and while it may have been of earlier origins our excavations suggested that the cemetery did not extend as far west as the site of the parish church. The excavations in the garden of Chapel Lane did not reveal a church, but they did hint at the presence of one. The burials were associated with some sort of wall, which survived only to three courses, over which the articulated legs of one skeleton lay. It was not possible to extend our excavation of the wall due to the layout of the garden. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to suppose that the wall was either a boundary wall – perhaps hinting at a degree of cemetery management – or part of the footings of a building, over which the cemetery subsequently expanded. The burials in the western part of the garden are more densely spaced than those further east, and display more evidence for intercutting, and this suggests some sort of focal point (?a church) to the west of the garden. Such

Specimen	Lab Number	C <sup>14</sup> (uncalibrated)	Date (calibrated 68%)	Date (calibrated 95%)
Whitton 007	Wk-10348	1375 ± 50 BP	AD 615 to 690	AD 560 to 780
Whitton 009	Wk-10349	1324 ± 45 BP	AD 650 to 770	AD 620 to 780
Whitton 020	Wk-10347	1218 ± 47 BP	AD 720 to 890	AD 680 to 960

Given that the skeletons were found in close proximity to each other it seems likely that they are broadly contemporary later 7th- or early 8th-century burials. However, the third date may indicate a slightly longer period of use for the cemetery, a deduction supported by evidence for intercutting and disturbance of burials, which tends not to be found in short-lived cemeteries.

The radiocarbon dates posed one particularly pressing question: were the burials associated with a church? By the later 7th century the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were notionally Christian, and the elite began to be buried in churchyards from the 7th century, although it is not unknown for cemeteries to be remote from churches until as late as the 10th century (Hadley 2000, 209-12). However, while it cannot be assumed that there was a church contemporary with the burials at Whitton, the size and longevity of the cemetery and the use of complex sets of iron coffin-fittings are more characteristic of cemeteries associated with 7th- to 9th-century churches than of contemporary cemeteries apparently unassociated with any known church (Blair 1994, 72-3;

a pattern of clustering of burials near to a church has been identified in Anglo-Saxon churchyard excavations at, for example, North Elmham (Norfolk) (Wade-Martins 1980, 188).

Although the archaeological evidence for a church is scanty, documentary evidence raises the intriguing possibility that the burials may have been associated with a religious community founded in the vicinity in the later 7th century. According to the 12th-century *Liber Eliensis* some time in the late 7th century St Æthelthryth left her husband, King Ecgrith of Northumbria, and fled back to East Anglia, a kingdom of which she was a princess. During her journey she is said to have crossed the Humber, probably at Winteringham, and then to have stayed at 'a hamlet situated on an island almost surrounded by fen called Alftham' around ten furlongs away. She is said to have founded a monastery there before continuing on her journey and subsequently founding a monastery at Ely (Cambs). Although this is a late account, other aspects of the *Liber Eliensis* can be verified by earlier documentary sources, and there is no evidence that

Ely was trying to lay claims to land in north Lincolnshire at a later date, such that a story about an earlier foundation may have been fabricated (Roffe 2002).

However, even if the tradition recorded in the *Liber Eliensis* is reliable, where was the foundation at *Alftham*? The case for it having been at Whitton rests entirely on its archaeology, although the name *Alftham* may offer some clues about the location of St Æthelthryth's foundation. It appears to mean something akin to 'island (OE *hamm*) frequented by swans (OE *elfitu*)', and *Alftham* was also said to have been located 'on an island almost surrounded by fen'. David Roffe (2002, 1) has recently suggested that the name and the topographical description may refer to the whole of the promontory defined by the rivers Trent and Humber and the Winterton Beck. However, they may just as well suit the more precise location of Whitton, hemmed in as it is by the Humber to the north and relatively wet, marshy land to the east and south. The hunt for the location of St Æthelthryth's monastery continues, but it is hoped that future work at Whitton will throw more light on the burial practices of the earliest Anglo-Saxon Christians.

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