Medieval Teesside

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The medieval period is usually thought of as starting with the Norman Conquest of 1066 AD and finishing with Henry VIII’s reformation of the church and the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1535.

The Norman Conquest came at a time when the north of England had been in a state of turmoil and anarchy due to the conflicts between different Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon lords.

The Normans found a fiercely independent region which took them nearly forty years to bring under control, a struggle which led to widespread destruction and devastation.

"In consequence of the Normans having plundered... principally Northumbria and the adjacent provinces, so great a famine prevailed that men, compelled by hunger, devoured human flesh, that of horses, dogs and cats, and whatever custom abhors... Meanwhile, the land being thus deprived of anyone to cultivate it for nine years, an extensive solitude prevailed all round. There was no village inhabited between York and Durham; they became lurking places for wild beasts and robbers, and were a great dread to travellers."

(Simeon of Durham, Chronicle of the English and the Danes)
Once the Normans established control, they put new people in charge to re-build the region’s economy and institutions.

The Bishop and Prior of Durham, the Brus, Neville and Percy families were the most important of a range of Norman families who held and controlled land in the north-east of England.

The troubles of the area did not finish with the establishment of Norman control. There was constant low level warfare with the Scots which sometimes flared up into more extensive fighting.

At the end of the 13th century Edward I attempted to assert his rule over Scotland and this resulted in nearly a century of warfare, including the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314.
2. Castles and Manor Houses

Castles and Churches are the two types of buildings most often associated with the medieval period and both were built by lords to help control an area both physically and spiritually.

While the medieval lord is associated with castles, most of them lived in manor houses with the church placed next door and the village owned by the lord close to hand.

Castles

The widespread use of the castle was brought to this country by the Normans and it provided the military backbone to the Norman Conquest and control of the country.

The earliest Norman castles were temporary constructions of earth and timber, the motte and bailey. This comprised a mound of earth (motte) set inside a palisaded enclosure (bailey). The motte might have a building set on it or just a further palisade while the bailey would contain the everyday buildings; hall, stores, kitchens, stables and quarters for the garrison.

There is a fine example of a motte and bailey at Bishopton, near Redmarshall in County Durham (reconstructed below).

![Motte and Bailey diagram]

Castle Levington, overlooking the River Leven is a ringwork. These castles used an earth rampart with a timber palisade on top to defend a central area containing buildings.

The development of castles saw the replacement of timber and earth defences with stone and the construction of more elaborate defences and living quarters. These changes can be very clearly seen at Pickering Castle in North Yorkshire.

On Teesside, stone castles were built at Wilton, Skelton and Stockton, however the only one of which a significant amount still survives is that at Kilton, near Brotton.
Kilton Castle

This was built by the ‘de Kilton’ family in about 1200 AD and was later owned by the ‘de Thwengs’. It may have replaced an earlier, timber defence. It is sited on the side of a valley and had an inner and outer bailey with the main buildings sited in the inner bailey. Although it fell into disuse in the 15th century its remains can still be seen today.

Stockton Castle

It is recorded that in 1183 the Bishop of Durham owned a great hall at Stockton. In the early 14th century the hall was re-built and a moat was probably added at this time. By the end of the century the site was being described as Stockton Castle and a later survey suggests that it had four main towers linked by blocks of apartments including kitchens, hall and chapel. This is very similar to the layout of Danby Castle on the North York Moors and Castle Bolton in Wensleydale.

During the English Civil Wars the castle was held by a Royalist garrison. Following their defeat by the Scots, the castle was demolished by order of Parliament.

Archaeological excavations in the area of the castle have recovered pieces of fine Norman stonework of the mid 12th century.
Manor Houses

Most lords lived in manor houses. The manor house had two main purposes, to house the lord and his family and to conduct the everyday business of running the lord’s estate.

At the beginning of the medieval period the manor house was a large hall where the lord sat at the high end with his family and those of lower rank sat at the lower end. Sleeping quarters might be curtained off behind the high table. It soon became the custom to build a separate, private chamber for the lord and his family. Eventually the traditional medieval manorial plan developed. This comprised ‘U’ or ‘H’ shaped block with private living and sleeping chambers for the lord and his family at one end. In the centre was the Hall and then a service end with foodstores, servants quarters and a kitchen.

In most cases these structures were built in wood but in some cases they were re-built in stone. A fragment of the manorial complex of the Brus family survives at Hart near Hartlepool.
3. Villages and Farming

Mixed farming was the basis of the medieval economy of the area. Wheat, oats and barley were cultivated, cows, sheep and pigs were reared. Each farmer held a number of individual strips of land grouped into furlongs, which often resulted in the creation of large open fields.

Villages were at the centre of the farmlands and in the North-East were laid out in a very distinct two row plan introduced by the Normans. This comprised two rows of farmsteads separated by a green. Each farmstead contained a group of buildings at the front, including the main dwelling, which was often a longhouse, barns and other agricultural buildings. Behind the buildings was an area used for growing vegetables, carrying out crafts and penning animals.

This layout of buildings and villages still survives in many parts of the area today, in Cowpen Bewley (left) for example, although the original timber structures have been replaced by modern brick or stone buildings during the 18th and 19th centuries.

It is still possible to see the earthworks of many Deserted Medieval Villages and their associated fields in the landscape today, many of which date from the 15th century. There were a number of reasons why villages were abandoned:

Scottish Wars
At the end of the 1200s Edward I tried to gain control of Scotland and first William Wallace and then Robert the Bruce fought against Edward and his son and descendants. In 1314 Robert the Bruce beat Edward II at the battle of Bannockburn and there followed a long period when the Scots virtually controlled the north of England and raided as far south as York. Many people fled their homes, particularly in Northumberland.

Plagues
The mid 14th century also saw major outbreaks of the plague and this could destroy whole villages. The few records we have show that the people of Billingham suffered particularly badly.

Climate
From the end of the 14th century the climate which had been slightly warmer and wetter became cooler and this combined with the reduced population led to poor harvests.

These events all combined to lead to the abandonment of many villages as population shrunk and people moved to better locations.
4. Towns and Trade

There were relatively few towns in England before the Norman Conquest and none in the Tees Valley. The area’s oldest towns today were founded either by the Brus family or the Bishop of Durham. Yarm (below) and Hartlepool were laid out and owned by the Brus family, while Stockton was founded by the Bishop of Durham alongside his manor house.

Guisborough was never truly a town, having no charter and owing its existence to the Augustinian priory founded by the Brus family. A town was founded, unsuccessfully, at Skelton to the south of the Brus castle and now only survives as earthworks in a field. The medieval towns of the area were laid out to the same design as the villages, two rows of properties with a broad area between. In the towns this became the market area where the shambles (butchers), tollbooths and other communal facilities were sited.
The success of each town depended on trade and those on rivers with good inland roads such as Stockton and Yarm, were the most successful. Hartlepool’s medieval success lay in its role as a port on a busy but hostile coast and in the part it was able to play as a supply centre during the Scottish wars of the 14th century. This also created its need for defences and it is the only town in the area which was walled.
5. Church & Monastery

The arrival of the Normans ushered in a large scale programme of construction of stone churches and the establishment of the great medieval monasteries.

The majority of village churches had been built by and belonged to the local nobles. Many settlements had churches before the Norman Conquest but these were built of wood, and the Normans quickly replaced them with stone.

Many were altered throughout the medieval and later periods, becoming larger and better lit, but good examples of Norman architecture survive at Hart, Liverton and Hilton. (below, St. Peter’s Church, Hilton)
Medieval Churches looked very different from the way they look today. There was no seating and instead of bare stone, the walls were rendered with white plaster and were richly painted in scenes from the bible. At a time when few people could write, their ideas of Christianity came from the church building and the priest.

Every church has two main parts, the chancel or choir which contained the altar and the nave where the congregation gathered. The Chancel was separated from the Nave by an elaborate, painted wooden screen surmounted by a cross (Rood) or a representation of the crucifixion. It was known, therefore, as a Rood Screen. This physical separation of the priest from the congregation increased the mystery and awe attached to the ceremonies carried out by the priest at the altar.

A parish might have more than one church, but all the main rites such as burial and baptism could only take place at the Parish Church, the others were known as chapels. For many years St Mary’s Church at Yarm was only a chapel of Kirklevington Church.

Wealthy people tried to ensure they were buried in the church and their graves were sometimes marked by large carved slabs. Medieval Grave Slabs showed a cross with a stepped base representing the hill of Calvary, the occupation of the person might be shown by a knight’s sword, a priest’s hand in blessing or a wool merchant’s wool shears. Grave slabs or parts of them can be seen in many of the area’s churches, often built into walls.

The wealthiest would have highly decorated tombs and might even have effigies or brasses depicting the person buried there.
In an attempt to restore religious activity in the Tees valley following the Norman devastations of the area, the Brus family founded the Augustinian Priory at Guisborough in c.1119 AD. The Augustinians were an order which went out into the community, providing priests for churches and ministering to the people. They became one of the richest monastic houses in the region, holding most of the churches in both Yorkshire and Durham. The remains of the Priory church and cloisters can still be seen and visited.

Guisborough (below) was by far the most important religious house in the area, although there were also communities of Franciscan (Grey) friars at Hartlepool and Dominican (Black) friars, at Yarm.

The Franciscans built a substantial church in Hartlepool, much of which has been excavated, while the Dominican Friary at Yarm is preserved below ground at Yarm School.

A number of small houses of nuns were also established, including one at Handale Priory, founded in 1133 by Robert de Percy with a community of ten Cistercian nuns. Another small nunnery gave its name to Nunthorpe and a third was established at Hutton near Guisborough.
The story of Robert de Thweng: a local Robin Hood

The owners of Kilton Castle had the right to appoint a priest to the wealthy church at Kirkleatham. The Prior of Guisborough was desperate to gain this right and his Canons had abused their spiritual position to persuade Sir William de Kylton to sign the church over to them, when he thought he was dying.

Immediately on obtaining the signature a messenger was dispatched to King John for him to confirm the gift. Recovering from his illness Sir William repudiated the gift, declaring that it was extorted from him when his mind was unhinged.

In 1222 the Castle of Kilton came into the hands of Robert de Thweng through his marriage to Matilda, niece of Sir William de Kylton, the previous holder.

Robert de Thweng was the grandson of Marmaduke de Thweng, one of the most powerful lords of Yorkshire at the beginning of the 13th century. On Marmaduke’s death in 1230, Robert inherited all of his lands, in total seven knights fees and Kilton which became the centre of this powerful estate.

Robert de Thweng was handsome, charming, passionate and stubborn. He could not tolerate the acts of the Prior of Guisborough and he appealed to the Archbishop of York for justice.

The Archbishop passed the petition to Papal Legate (Pope’s representative) in England. The Papal Legate passed the petition back to the Archbishop who then passed it to the Prior of Guisborough!

The Prior of Guisborough passed it back to the Archbishop and so on………

And then a papal nominee was appointed to the Church at Kirkleatham, a foreign clergyman, somebody interested only in lining his pocket.

Robert de Thweng had had enough. He gathered together a body of local nobles and waged war on the foreign clergy who were milking the church in Yorkshire.
Using the name of ‘Will Wither’ he burnt tithe barns, attacked the foreign clergy, re-distributed the ill gotten wealth to the poor and made his name feared throughout Yorkshire. His headquarters throughout this time was Kilton Castle.

The Papal Legate, Cardinal Otho, excommunicated Sir Robert. This was serious for Robert de Thweng; under excommunication he could lose his lands. He appealed to the great northern nobility.

In 1227 they came to Kilton:- Lords Percy, Nevill, Fitz-Randolph, de Vesci, de Maulay, de Menyll, de Roos and de Brus accompanied by twenty lesser knights. These were the people who ruled the north of England, not the King or the Church but this awesome group of nobles.

They had common cause with Robert. He was one of them, and if his rights were under attack, theirs could be too. Sir Robert was entrusted with letters to the Pope setting out their grievances and making clear the power they wielded.

Sir Robert de Thweng of Kilton Castle went to Rome and had an audience with Pope Gregory IX. He returned armed with strict instructions to the Papal Legate, the Archbishop of York and the Prior of Guisborough that they should restore his property to him and no longer interfere in the rights of the great nobles.

In 1229 the advowson of Kirkleatham was restored to Sir Robert de Thweng and ‘Will Wither’ disappeared into history.

Kirkleatham Church
7. The Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Tudors

The 1500s saw huge changes across England and Wales. The Tudors gained the English throne when Henry Tudor (Henry VII) defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. This brought to an end the devastating civil wars known as the Wars of the Roses and united the two warring houses of York and Lancaster.

The second Tudor King, Henry VIII had problems with the Roman Church over his succession of marriages in order to obtain an heir and over who controlled the church in England. These difficulties, combined with a need for money, led him to dissolve the monasteries and sell off their extensive lands and valuable resources, mainly to merchants and the local lords.

Guisborough Priory (below) was dissolved and the land bought by the Chaloner family, who still own it today. The friaries at Yarm and Hartlepool had their contents and building materials sold and both were demolished.

The monks and nuns were on the whole treated well, being awarded pensions and allowed to live peacefully unless they resisted. There was however widespread feeling against Henry and his dissolution of the monasteries.

This led to an uprising in 1536 against the King and his policies throughout Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and other parts of the North, known as the ‘Pilgrimage of Grace’. This unrest, combined with concern over Scotland making an alliance with France led to the building of the massive defences at Berwick.

Thirty years later Hartlepool was captured by rebels during the ‘Rising of the North’ (1569). This was similar to the Pilgrimage of Grace and was based on demands for the restoration of the ‘old religion’. It is probable that Hartlepool was captured in the hope that reinforcements could be landed from France.
8. Finding Medieval Sites

The medieval period is different from earlier periods in that there are many written records. These give us lots of information about the history of the period and can provide a great deal of detail of how the law worked, what rents were paid and how the great families and institutions ran their estates.

Many of the churches established in this period are still in use today. Very few other medieval buildings survive on Teesside, although there are a few examples to be seen in Yarm and Guisborough.

Some medieval sites have disappeared completely and survive only as earthworks or cropmarks visible from aerial photography, or as scatters of pottery in fields.

In some places evidence of medieval farming still survives as the corrugations visible in fields which are the remains of ridge and furrow ploughing, while scatters of pottery found in the fields can often show where earlier settlements had been built.
Further Reading

If you have enjoyed this booklet the following sources of information are also available:-

Archaeological Booklet No 1. **Anglo-Saxon Teesside**.

Archaeological Booklet No 2. **Iron Age Teesside**

Archaeological Booklet No 3. **Roman Teesside**

Archaeological Booklet No 4. **Vikings on Teesside**

Site Guide 1. **Archaeological Excavations at Catcote, Hartlepool**

These booklets are available to borrow from local libraries or can be downloaded free of charge from our website (see below).

To buy copies of our booklets please contact us for current prices and availability.

**Tees Archaeology Website**

You can find further information on archaeology in the area on our website.

www.teesarcaheology.com