

EXTRACT FROM ENGLISH HERITAGE'S RECORD OF SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

MONUMENT: Ellerton Priory: a Cistercian nunnery including fishponds, water management system, mill, field systems and Ellerton medieval settlement

PARISH: ELLERTON ABBEY

DISTRICT: RICHMONDSHIRE

COUNTY: NORTH YORKSHIRE

NATIONAL MONUMENT NO: 31353

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE(S): SE07869730
SE07879673
SE07909646

DESCRIPTION OF THE MONUMENT

The monument includes remains of Ellerton Priory and the adjacent early medieval village, including fishponds and field systems located on the south bank of the River Swale 10km west of Richmond. Also included are earthwork remains of a mill and the water management system, located on the hillside 700m to the south, which provided the water supply to the priory and its associated industrial activities.

The monument comprises three separate areas of protection. The first area contains the priory and the adjacent village remains, and occupies the whole of the field west of Ellerton Abbey house and most of the field to the east as far south as the water course extending east to west. The second area contains the water management system, associated structures and areas of medieval agriculture, and occupies the field north east of Juniper Gill Plantation and part of the field to the north west. The third area contains a reservoir and associated water channels and is located on the moor edge to the south. The monument is also known as Ellerton Abbey although this is not the correct name.

The medieval village of Ellerton was one of the settlements located in Lower Swaledale mentioned in the Domesday survey of 1086. The settlement then comprised land two leagues long and one league wide which could be worked by two plough teams. The manor was held by Gamall and the whole was valued at 13 shillings. It is thought to have been established as early as 800-900 as an outlying township of a wider pre-Norman territorial unit based upon Downholme 4km to the east. The irregular plan of the village is typical of pre-Conquest settlements in the region. By the 14th century, in common with other villages in the area it suffered a decline in fortune due to bad harvests, disease and raids by the Scots and was eventually abandoned.

Ellerton Priory was a small Cistercian nunnery dedicated to Saint Mary. Relatively little is known of the history of the priory but the Eaglescliffe family, who may have been lords of Ellerton, have been suggested as founders in around 1200. As with many Yorkshire nunneries, Ellerton was small and at its height probably only housed thirteen nuns, and as few as five are recorded in 1381. The priory was poor but it is known that it held land in Ellerton manor and two properties in Walburn 6km to the west. At the Dissolution income

from rents and farms in Richmond and neighbouring villages including Bellerby and Constable Burton was recorded. In the early 14th century the priory suffered at the hands of Scottish raiders, specifically in November 1347 when it was utterly despoiled. The priory was surrendered to the crown on 18th August 1536 and formally dissolved the following year. After the Dissolution the site of the priory was bought on a 21 year lease by Ralph Closeby, a member of the royal household. In 1568 the site was sold to Percival Bowes and John Moysier when it became part of the manor of Ellerton under the lordship of Richard Brackenbury whose family had been former tenants of the priory. In the early 17th century the manor passed to the Drax family.

The remains of Ellerton Priory are dominated by the church, parts of which survive as upstanding ruins, and are Listed Grade II. Recent earthwork and geophysical surveys of the priory show that it demonstrates the usual layout of a monastic house, with a church, orientated east to west, forming the north range of a four-sided complex known as the cloister. The typical arrangement of a cloister included accommodation located on the east side with direct access to the church, the south side housed the kitchens and refectory, and the west side stores, cellars and sometimes a guest house. The cloister lay at the centre of an enclosure known as the inner court which contained a range of further buildings essential for the economic and social functions of the priory which could include an infirmary, and lodging for the prioress or secular guests. Beyond the inner court was the precinct which housed outbuildings and structures necessary for the economic functions of the priory such as gardens, a bakehouse, workshops, stables and stores, as well as some agricultural land.

The precinct was normally defined by a wall or fence. Remains of such features survive as low earthworks or are known from survey to survive below ground. Nunneries in contrast to male monastic houses tended to be poorer and this is reflected in their size and use of lesser building materials such as timber or cob, with the exception of the church which was invariably of stone construction. This use of lesser constructional techniques is evident by the slight nature of the earthworks.

The church lies in the centre of the inner court and measures 34.5m long by 8m wide. It includes a rectangular aisleless, undivided nave, the chancel and the western tower. The tower stands to a height of 14.7m and the interior is open to the roof. The roof was replaced in the 1980s as part of a programme of repair. The east end of the church survives to a height of 5.5m. The earliest elements of the church date to the 13th century but the greater part belongs to the 15th century. The church was partly remodelled in the 19th century to turn it into a romantic Gothic ruin to be viewed from the nearby Ellerton Abbey house, which was built c.1830. This work included the rebuilding of the north wall of the nave, the insertion of a window into the west wall of the tower, and raising the roof by adding battlements. There are pieces of at least three elaborate stone coffin lids which may be dated to the late 13th century in the church.

The cloister, lying to the south of the church, measures about 25m east to west by 20m north to south. The inner court, surrounding the cloister, measures about 120m east to west by 150m north to south. It is defined on the west side by earthwork remains of buildings orientated north to south, on the east and north sides by a slight bank and on the south side by a prominent bank. At the north west corner of the inner court there are the remains of a gatehouse. From here a well preserved trackway extends west, through the adjacent village remains, and originally continued west as one of the main routes up into Swaledale. The south side of the inner court has a further entrance way allowing access to the precinct to the south. There are earthwork and buried remains of further buildings within the precinct. To the west of the gatehouse there are the remains of a small complex of structures which have been identified as a small farmstead within the precinct. There are also remains of agricultural features within the precinct including a block of ridge and furrow to the south west and a wide terrace to the east.

In the field to the west of the priory, to the south of the village and adjacent to the modern road, there are the remains of a complex of fishponds. These include a rectangular tank 1.5m deep and measuring 10m by 20m. At the east end there is a smaller shallower tank about 8m square and a second smaller tank to the north. There are footings for a small building, possibly a fish curing house, on the north side of the large tank. The whole complex is surrounded by a low earthwork bank. The ponds were fed by water from the water management system to the south.

The remains of Ellerton village are located in the field west of the priory. The north side of the field inclines upwards sharply and then rises gently to a cliff overlooking the river Swale. On the top of this slope there are the remains of the village street extending from the west and continuing east to the priory. Clustered around the street is an irregular arrangement of rectangular platforms upon which buildings stood. Some of these are cut into the south-facing slope. The building platforms measure up to 6m by 3m and stand 1.5m in height. Some of the building remains on the top of the slope lie within small rectangular enclosures.

In addition to the building platforms on the slope there are also terraces, up to 7m wide which extend from the lower part of the field up to the top of the slope. These terraces contained tracks or were used for horticulture. On the east side of the lower part of the field there are two large rectangular earthwork enclosures which are partly cut into the rising ground to the east. The remainder of the lower part of the field west of the fishponds contains linear, parallel earthworks known as ridge and furrow which form part of the medieval field system. There is also a further block of ridge and furrow in the north east of the field. On the hillside to the south there are also blocks of ridge and furrow surviving as faint earthworks extending down the slope in the field (in the second area of protection) to the east of Juniper Gill. There is a clear terrace 4m wide which crosses the field from east to west about 40m north of the ruined field wall which marks the south edge of the field. It is not currently clear whether all or part of the horticultural terraces, enclosures and ridge and furrow were associated with the village or the priory.

On the hillside to the south are the remains of the water management system. This system provided water to a variety of industrial and economic functions located on the hillside. The system also provided water for the fishponds and to the priory for uses including the kitchens and latrines. The creation of this system included the modification of existing natural watercourses and the construction of conduits and water channels known as leats. The main stream in the area, Juniper Gill, was dammed just below Juniper Gill Plantation to create a reservoir to control water flow. A leat extended across the hillside for 80m to the west to a further natural water course from which additional water was fed into the reservoir. A second reservoir was constructed out of a natural hollow further up the hillside south east of Juniper Gill Plantation. This fed two stone lined conduits which ran north and downslope.

Remains of the reservoir on Juniper Gill survive as prominent mounds on each side of the gill 20m below the plantation. The leat to the west survives as a prominent earth and stone bank 2m wide on the north, downslope side, with the channel to the south being 1.5m wide. The second reservoir (in the third area of protection) measures 30m east to west by 17m north to south. It is formed from a natural hollow which was originally dammed at the west end, and remains of the earthworks supporting the sluice system still survive. At the west end a leat 0.5m wide survives as a shallow trench extending north as far as the field wall where it turns and extends east for 40m then joins a further overflow leat leading north from the reservoir. The water course then continues north below ground through the next field. The exact position of the leat in this field or whether it survives is yet to be confirmed and hence this section is not included in the scheduling. After 150m a single leat emerges as an earthwork just beyond the ruined wall line where it is

identifiable as a shallow depression up to 0.5m wide extending north down the slope. The leat continues north for a further 40m and then is breached just beyond a wide terrace crossing the field. Here it can be seen that the leat is composed of a stone built conduit. Further north the leat is preserved as clear, embanked, trenches up to 1.2m wide.

Along the east side of Juniper Gill, north of the dam, are the earthworks of a series of rectangular buildings. These are the remains of buildings which required a regulated water flow such as mills, smithies and textile processing. One building, identified as a mill is located about 150m north of the plantation, and measures 6m by 3m. There are also traces of the course of water chutes, known as launders, feeding the building. In addition to the industrial buildings there are also remains of ancillary buildings such as stores and workshops. Remains of at least four of these structures survive as low earthworks up to 6m by 10m. Further structures requiring a water supply were located on the west side of the leat lying to the east. These are preserved as a series of four platforms cut into the slope adjacent to the conduit; they measure up to 6m wide and 4m deep. It is thought that the exploitation of water power at Juniper Gill pre-dates the priory and was associated with the village. The mill building has been identified as having a horizontal water wheel, a form of technology which had disappeared from England by the 12th century.

Both Juniper Gill and the other water channels disappear underground to the north as they run beneath improved fields and their exact course is unclear. However water from these sources emerges in the south west of the field lying west of Ellerton Abbey house and flows east through conduits which may be medieval in origin. These water courses are still in use to provide drainage and water for stock and are not included in the scheduling.

A number of features are excluded from the monument. These include all farm walls, fences, gates, tree guards, stock feeding and watering facilities and modern water conduits. However, the ground beneath these features is included. The area enclosed by the leats and reservoir in the third area of protection is totally excluded from the scheduling.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

A nunnery was a settlement built to sustain a community of religious women. Its main buildings were constructed to provide facilities for worship, accommodation and subsistence. The main elements are the church and domestic buildings arranged around a cloister. This central enclosure may be accompanied by an outer court and gatehouse, the whole bounded by a precinct wall, earthworks or moat. Outside the enclosure, fishponds, mills, field systems, stock enclosures and barns may occur. The earliest English nunneries were founded in the seventh century AD but most of these had fallen out of use by the ninth century. A small number of these were later refounded. The tenth century witnessed the foundation of some new houses but the majority of medieval nunneries were established from the late 11th century onwards. Nunneries were established by most of the major religious orders of the time, including the Benedictines, Cistercians, Augustinians, Franciscans and Dominicans. It is known from documentary sources that at least 153 nunneries existed in England, of which the precise locations of only around 100 sites are known. Few sites have been examined in detail and as a rare and poorly understood medieval monument type all examples exhibiting survival of archaeological remains are worthy of protection.

Medieval villages in England were marked by a great regional diversity in form, size and type, and the protection of their archaeological remains needs to take these differences into account. To do this, England has been divided into three broad provinces on the basis of each area's distinctive mixture of nucleated and dispersed settlements. These can be further divided into sub-Provinces and local regions, possessing characteristics which have evolved

gradually during the past 1500 years or more.

The Craven Block local region, including the Askrigg Block, encompasses the high moorlands south of Stainmore. Away from the 'specialist nucleations' of post-medieval date (the clusters of houses associated with mining and the railways), dispersed settlement includes both seasonal and permanent farmsteads, as well as specialist sheep and cattle ranches. The latter were normally outlying dependencies of larger settlements or estate centres located in adjacent regions. In these upland environments, dating settlements can be difficult.

Medieval villages were organised agricultural communities, sited at the centre of a parish or township, that shared resources such as arable land, meadow and woodland. Village plans varied enormously, but when they survive as earthworks their most distinguishing features include roads and minor tracks, platforms on which stood houses and other buildings such as barns, enclosed crofts and small enclosed paddocks. They frequently included the parish church within their boundaries. In the northern province of England, villages were the most distinctive aspect of rural life, and their archaeological remains are one of the most important sources of understanding about rural life in the five or more centuries following the Norman Conquest.

Medieval villages were supported by a mixed system of agriculture based on both arable and pasture. Arable cultivation usually took place in strips of land, which were divided up amongst individual villagers. The cultivation of these strips led to long, wide ridges, and the resultant 'ridge and furrow' where it survives is the most obvious physical indication of medieval field systems. The strips were laid out in groups known as furlongs defined by terminal headlands at the plough turning-points and lateral grass balks.

Furlongs were in turn grouped into large open fields. Well preserved ridge and furrow, especially in its original context adjacent to village earthworks, is both an important source of information about medieval agrarian life and a distinctive contribution to the character of the historic landscape. It is usually now covered by the hedges or walls of subsequent field enclosure.

In addition to field systems, other medieval agricultural activities were practised such as fish farming in special fishponds. These were artificial pools of slow moving water in which fish were bred and stored in order to provide a constant supply of fresh fish for consumption and trade. Fishponds were maintained by a water management system to regulate water flow. In addition to the ponds there would be buildings for use by fishermen for storing equipment or fish curing. The tradition of constructing and using fishponds in England began during the medieval period and peaked in the 12th century. Large and complex systems were often associated with the wealthy sectors of society such as monastic institutions and the aristocracy. Small and simple examples are commonly found at villages throughout England. As part of the economic functions of the community most villages contained one or more watermills. A watermill uses the gravitational force of water to turn a paddled wheel which enabled the operation of varying kinds of machinery. The wheel could be set directly into a river or stream or more commonly powered by water fed through artificial channels. Early medieval mills could have horizontal or vertical wheels and the former had disappeared from England by the 12th century. The earliest mill identified thus far dates to the late 7th century AD and by the time of the Domesday Book an estimated 6,000 were in existence. During the medieval period mills were usually used for grinding corn but with technological improvements their use spread to further agricultural and industrial purposes such as tilt hammers and bellows and textile processing.

The remains at Ellerton preserve a wide range of features associated with the medieval period. Important remains of both the nunnery and the village and their associated social, agricultural and economic activities survive. The monument offers important scope for understanding the relationship between the religious and the secular communities and the consequent impact on the wider dales landscape.

SCHEDULING HISTORY

Monument included in the Schedule on 27th April 1949 as:

COUNTY/NUMBER: Yorkshire 116

NAME: Ellerton Priory

Scheduling amended on 1st April 1974 to:

COUNTY/NUMBER: North Yorkshire 116

NAME: Ellerton Priory

The reference of this monument is now:

NATIONAL MONUMENT NUMBER: 31353

NAME: Ellerton Priory: a Cistercian nunnery including fishponds, water management system, mill, field systems and Ellerton medieval settlement

MONUMENT INCLUDED IN THE SCHEDULE ON 09th November 2000