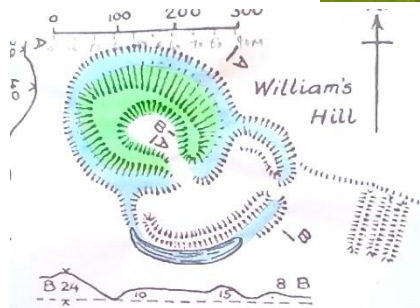


EASBY MOTTE

An enigma from start to finish.

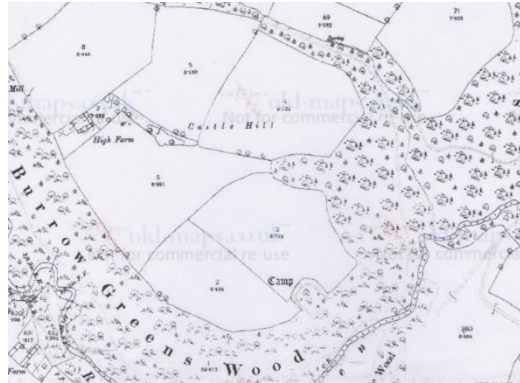
What is a motte. According to the dictionary, the word comes from the Old French for a mound. This is certainly the case at Pickering Castle, Bishopton Motte and Middleham Castle all of which have been destinations for coach trips in 2018, 2024 and 2017 respectively.



Pickering and Bishopton, and many others around the country, all have the classic frustrum shape (or an upturned flower pot!) whereas Middleham has a ring mound with a hollow centre measuring about 20m by 25m.

Easby Motte is similar to the Middleham Motte as it also has a ring mound up to 3m high, though much smaller with outer limits measuring 40-45m across as opposed to 60-65m at Middleham, with the inner area also measuring 20 by 25m. The dip in the mound on the north-eastern side indicates a probable entrance.





Easby Motte is situated on a pronounced spur on the northern side of the western entrance to Kildale which is a dead-end valley. Today it has trees on the mound and around the top of the spur but without the trees the view to the Pennines, the Vale of Mowbray and all Kildale would have been without obstruction.

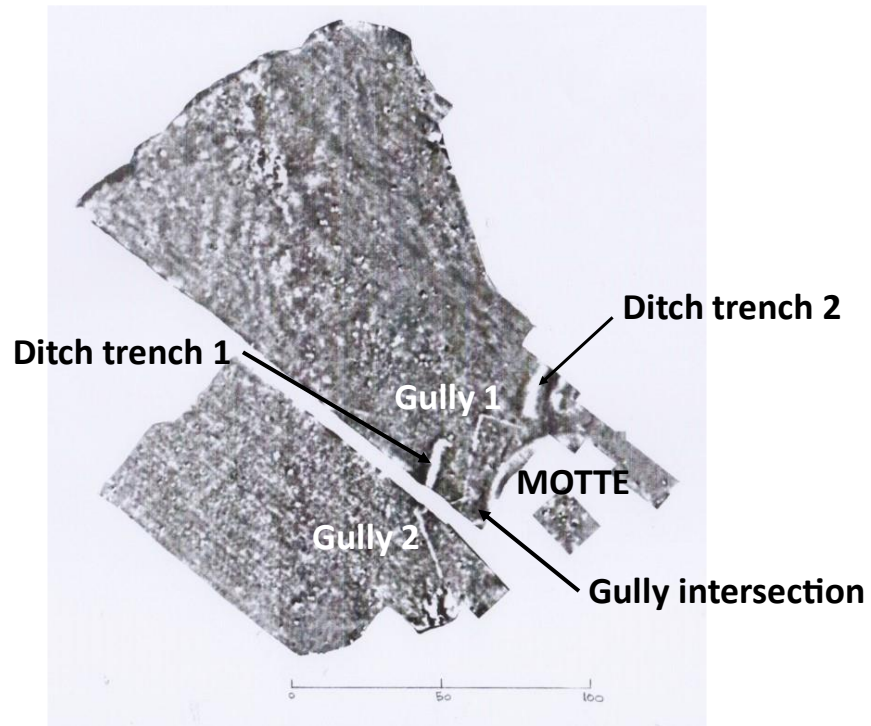
The south-western and south-eastern flanks of the spur are very steep with the River Leven about 50m below on the south-eastern side. On the north-western side the land is relatively flat but with a steep bank to the north-east. The access to the Motte must have been from the north-west and therefore the weakest side for defence hence the highest part of the ring-mound.



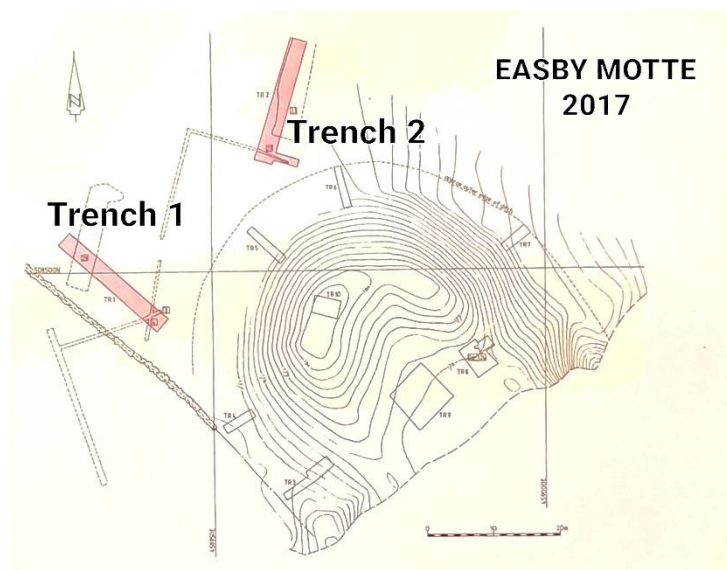
THE NORTH-WEST PART OF THE MOUND.

After an initial visit to the Motte in October 2016, a magnetometer survey was carried out in early December 2016 (below) and a topographical survey undertaken in late December of the same year. (All further site plans will use the topographical survey).

The magnetometer survey revealed two ditches and two intersecting gullies in front of the Motte. No other features were found in the fields including any sign of an access trackway.



MAGNETOMETER SURVEY



The excavations commenced in 2017 with the opening of Trenches 1 and 2. Trench 1 was placed across the north-western ditch and the intersection of the gullies. Trench 2 was placed along the northern ditch and across part of gully 1. Both trenches measured 20m long and about 3m wide. There was a small extension at the end of Trench 2 to find the end of gully 1.

TRENCH 1.

The ditch in Trench 1 (photo left) measured about 4m across and about 0.7m deep and was full of various types of sand. Four pieces of Tees Valley Ware type A were found in the fill at various levels.

At the natural level, it was observed that the south-western gully (gully 2) (photo right) cut the fill of the north-western gully (gully 1), therefore phases 2 and 1 respectively. The profile of the phase 1 gully was box-shaped and measured about 0.5m wide and about 0.35m deep. The profile of the phase 2 gully was more irregular, measuring about 0.8m wide and about 0.2m deep. The only find was a lump of rusty slag in the phase 2 gully.



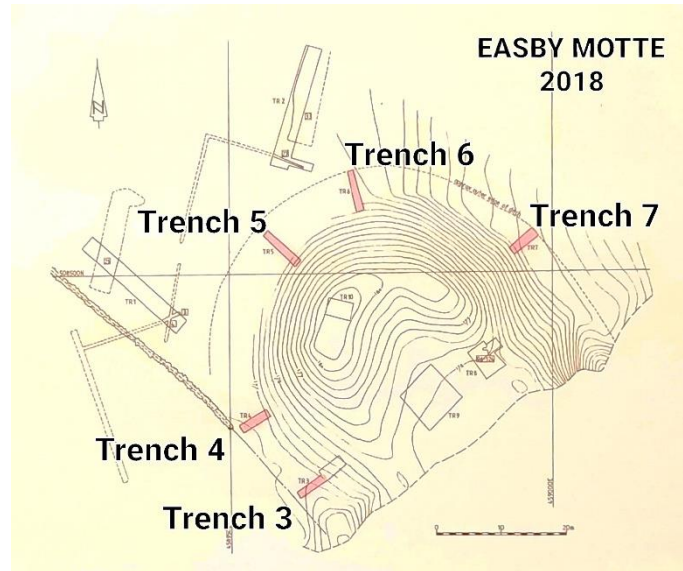
TRENCH 2.

The ditch in Trench 2 (photo left) measured about 3.5m wide by about 1m deep and was filled entirely with a sand and gravel mix.

8 pieces of Northern Gritty Ware were found including one 'box' shaped rim. Although the pottery was spread out across the ditch, they were all at the same level suggesting a 'ghost' layer inside what was a homogeneous fill.

When the phase 1 gully (photo right) was emptied, it was found to consist of a series of 8 post-holes, about 0.15m wide at the base but much wider at the top implying that when the stakes were removed, they were rotated in order to loosen them.





After gaining permission from English Heritage (the Motte itself is scheduled), the 2018 season was dedicated to investigating the ditch surrounding the Motte.

Except for a slight hollow, the ditch was level with the surrounding ground. The only places where the ditch was visible were very close to the precipitous bank down to the river.

Five trenches were excavated across the ditch. The profiles of the ditch were all different.

Trench 3 had a very stony internal bank and a flat clayey bottom.

Trench 4 had a relatively flat bottom for the full width of the trench and ditch.

Trench 5 had a stony internal bank with a very broad bottom.

Trench 6 had an even broader bottom width.

Trench 7 was only 1.5m wide at the bottom but much deeper than all the other profiles.

Except for trench 7, the outer limits of the ditch were not reached because they impinged on the adjacent fields.

Except for one piece of Tees Valley Ware type A strap handle found in Trench 6, there were no other finds from the trenches. They were all barren except for that one piece!



TRENCH 3



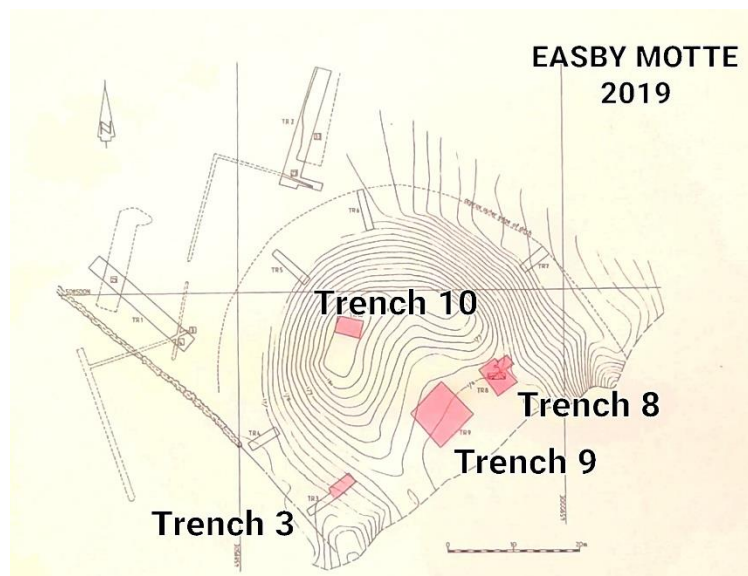
TRENCH 4



TRENCH 6



TRENCH 7



The 2019 season investigated the inside and entrance of the Motte.

Trench 3 was extended to find the extent of the area of stones on the inner face of the ditch found in the previous year. The stones petered out about 6m from the bottom of the ditch. It is just possible that they could represent a paved ramp into the Motte but it is more likely that they were either a natural deposition or man-made revetment because the stones were at different angles and very uneven.

Trench 9 measured about 10m square on the relatively flat area inside the Motte. It was hoped that this trench would produce evidence of some sort of timber or stone structure. However, nothing was found, including pottery or small finds, except for a few small 'stake holes' which proved to have no real depth when sectioned. To test whether natural had been reached, a small area of the trench was dug down to about 0.6m so confirmed.

Trench 10 measured about 4m by 3m and was placed across the top of the highest part of the north-western mound to try find evidence of any timber palisade. No post or stake holes were found and no pottery or small finds.



TRENCH 9



TRENCH 10



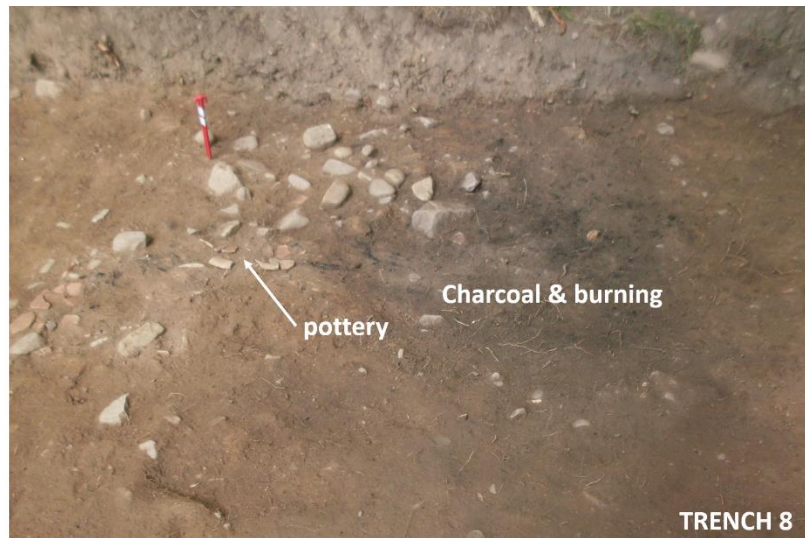
TRENCH 8

TRENCH 8.

As in the previous years, a mechanical excavator was used to strip off the topsoil from all the trenches and this was the case for Trench 8.

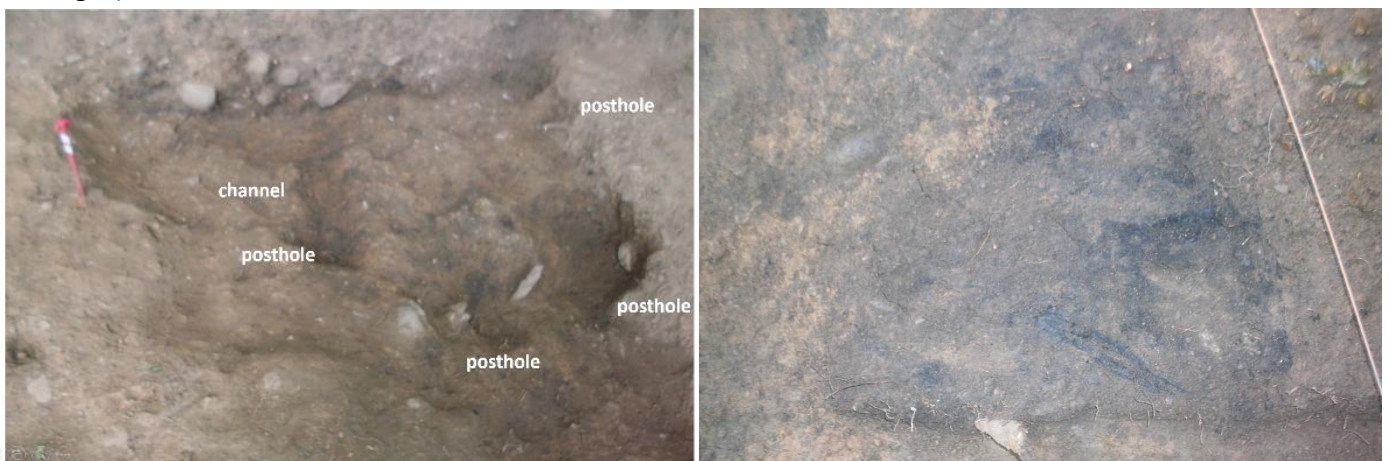
When the driver was asked to remove a little more soil, a great cry went up because he had brought up a very rare sight on this site – pottery!

167 pieces of pottery were eventually found all within just over a meter square. Just under half were disturbed by the machine and the remaining in-situ pottery was found in groups. The trench originally measured 3.5m by 3.5m but was extended north-west by 1.5m with another later extension to the north-east which measured about 1.5m by 1.5m. Both extensions were excavated to determine the extent of the pottery scatter and associated features.



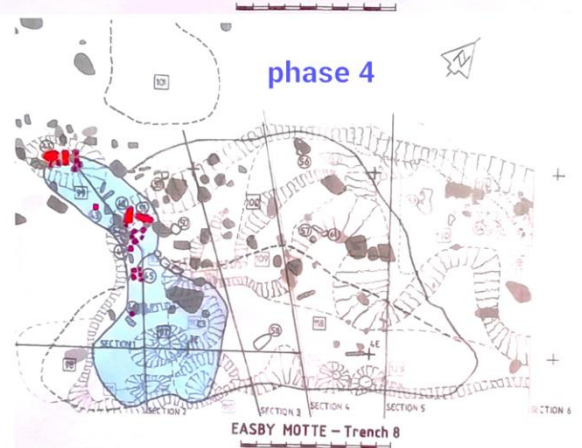
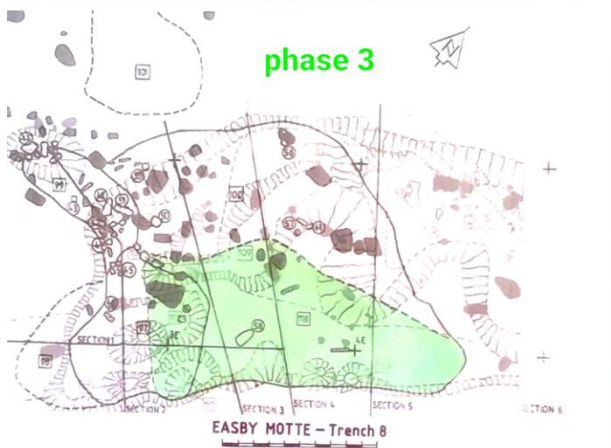
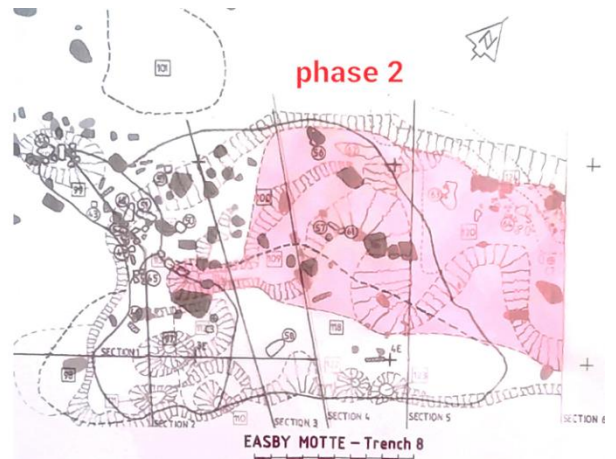
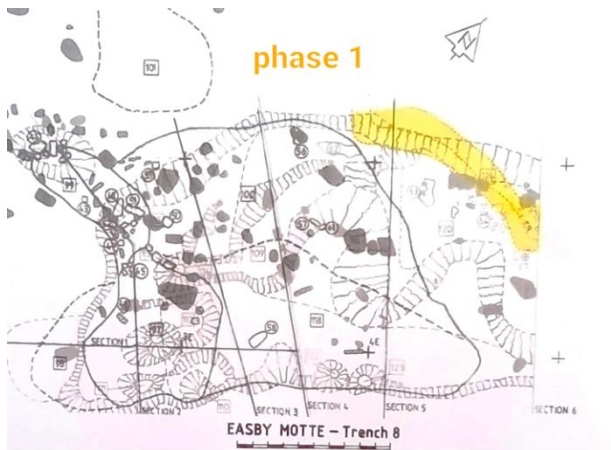
Adjacent to a grouping of 90 pieces of pottery was a large area of charcoal and burnt wood measuring about 0.35m by 0.4m. There were no other features in the trench except for a piece of Tees Valley Ware type A strap handle about 1m north-west of the main scatter and similar to that found in Trench 6.

It was found that the burning was in a shallow depression, about 0.1m deep, with four associated post-holes and a channel (phase 4). It appears that the depression had cut into an earlier deposit of even more distinct pieces of burnt wood and charcoal (phase 3) (below right).



This deposit of burnt wood continued into the north-eastern extension and it was found that it too had cut into another shallow depression filled with burnt wood, charcoal, burnt clay and some rusty metalwork including an axe head (phase 2) (below left). Below this depression was a channel, about 0.5m wide by 0.1m deep, filled with charcoal (phase 1) (below right). Although the features continued beyond the extension, it was impossible to extend further because of a mesh of tree roots.

Four samples of the burnt wood were taken from the four phases of depositions, two were used for Carbon 14 dating. No pottery was found associated with the first three phases.



POTTERY.

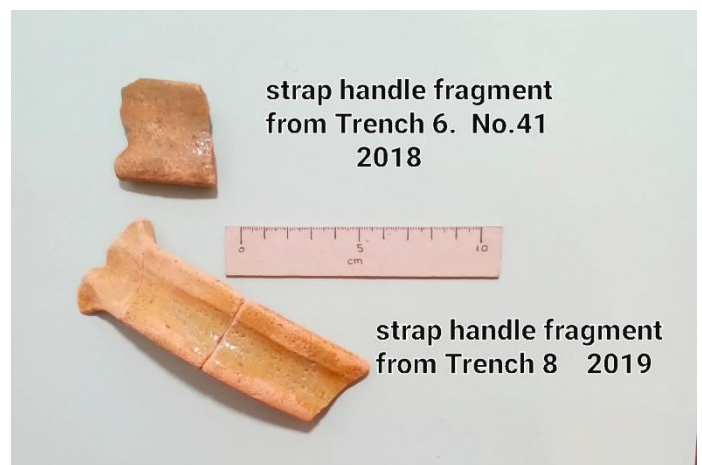
Although the pottery from Trench 8 was all Northern Gritty Ware (except for the strap handle) there are two distinct types – Type 1 has a cream to light pink fabric, thin wall, external rilling and was well-made though with much grit in the fabric and on the surface. Type 2 has dark brick red faces with a black core, roughly finished, thicker walls and much fabric and surface grit. Only one rim (in Type 1) was found in Trench 8 with an internal diameter of 100mm. It was simply folded with a pronounced neck and it was found in nine pieces.

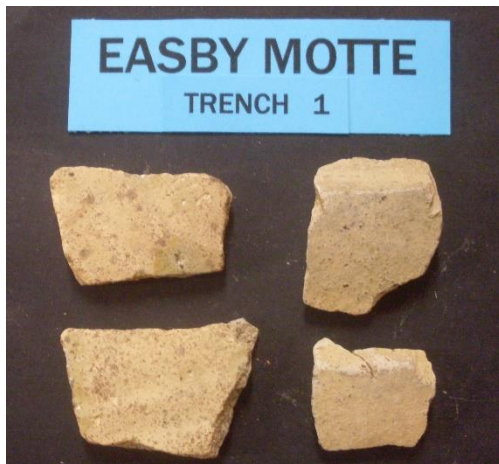
One base, in 3 pieces, was found in Type 1 with a diameter of 90mm.

There were 7 pieces of Type 2 bases found forming 4 stuck-together sections all with 100mm diameters.

As noted above, just under half the 167 pieces of pottery found in Trench 8 were disturbed. It was hoped that the pottery found in the in-situ groups would have consisted of one pottery type per group. This was true for four groups (3 of Type 1 & 1 of Type 2) but two groups were mixed.

So, although the two pottery types probably represent two different vessels, the fact that some of the groups were mixed would indicate that they were deposited in a random fashion and just thrown in a heap.





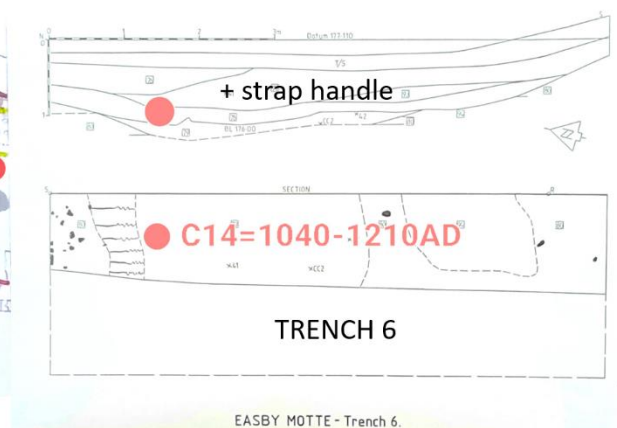
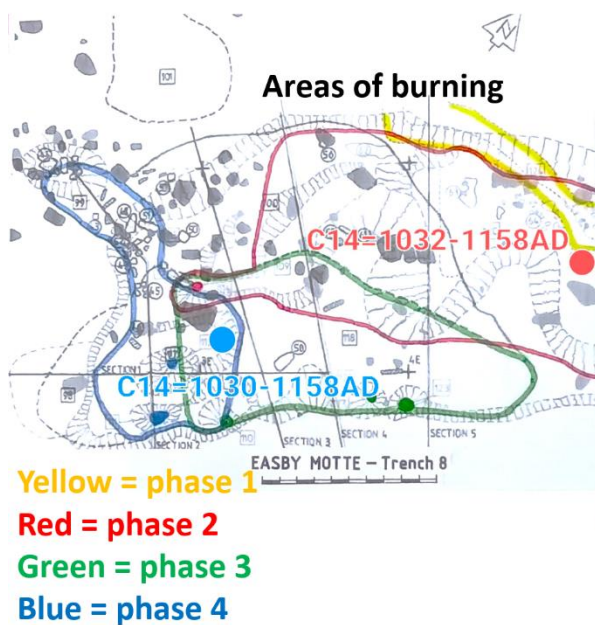
DATES AND DISCUSSION.

The Tees Valley Ware type A from Trench 1 and the strap handles from Trench 6 and 8 are all generally dated to the 12th century.

The Northern Gritty Ware from Trench 2 and Trench 8 is generally thought to be late 11th century to early 12th century.

Four charcoal/burnt wood samples were sent off to be Carbon 14 dated, generously funded by PLACE and Archaeological Research Services.

From the plans below, the two dates from the burning hollows in Trench 8 are identical and the one from Trench 6, although showing a much wider date span, still fall within the same time frame.



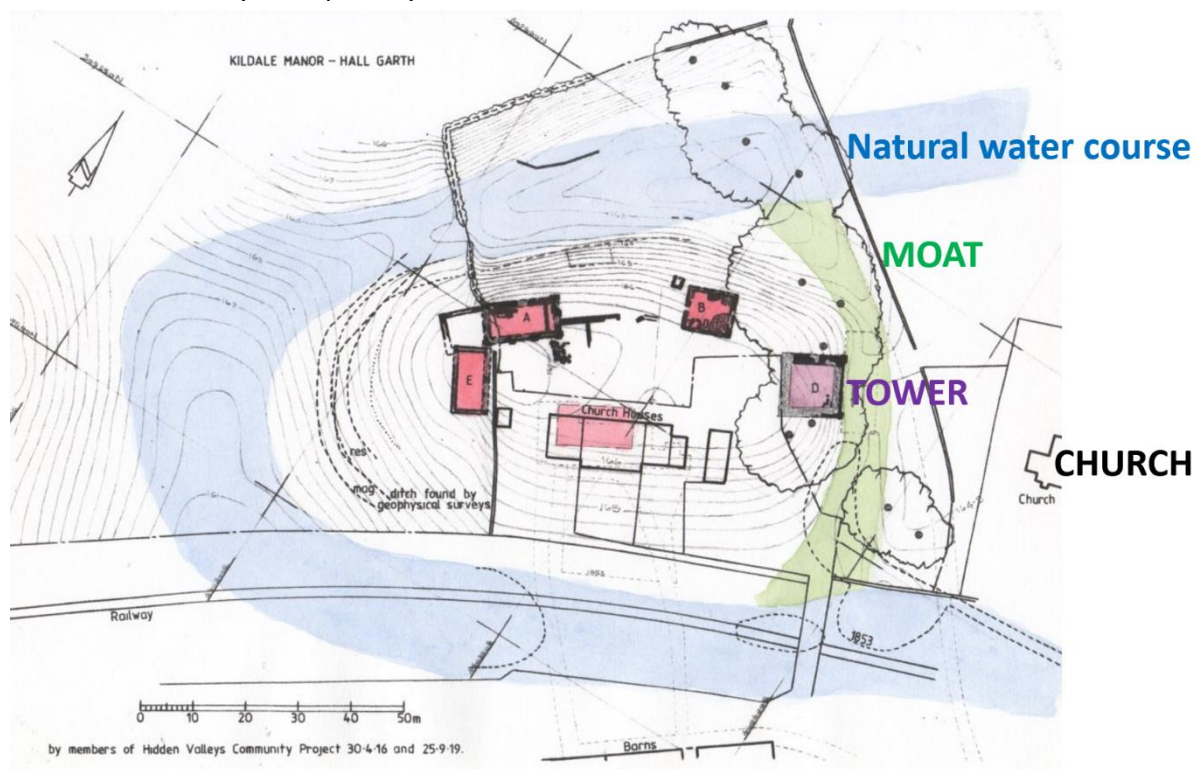
The Motte is actually in the Parish of Easby, the boundary being the River Leven.

Pre-conquest the manor of Easby was held by Haward but it is listed in the Domesday Book as Terra Regis (land held by the King).

Kildale was held by a Saxon called Ligulf until his death in 1040. At the time of the Domesday Book, the lord of the manor was a Scandinavian called Orme.

It is probable that Arnald de Percy took over the Manor in about 1100.

Kildale Manor was excavated between 1957 and 1976 from which they recovered 6950 pieces of pottery which were assessed by Anne Jenner, a Medieval pottery expert. Anne produced a time-line graph illustrating the highs and lows of the occupation of the Manor House. The main peak of activity was between 1250 and 1300 with a smaller peak in about 1150 but relatively little pottery around 1100.



It is probable that the first Norman building on the natural mound was the tower with a defensive moat across the unprotected land towards the church. Later a suite of residential buildings was constructed and much later there is evidence that the tower was dismantled.

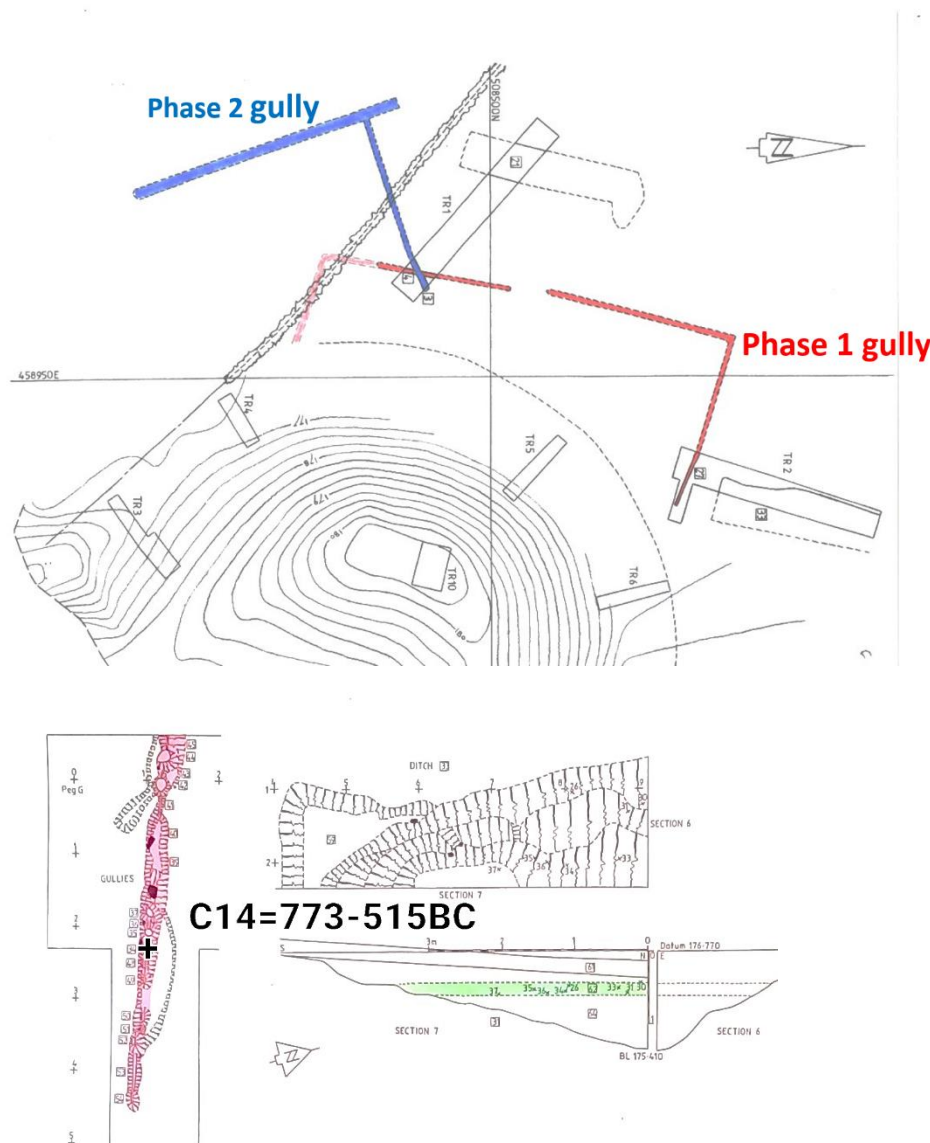
Combining the Motte pottery dates and the Carbon 14 dates from the burning hollows and the ditch, an occupation at the beginning of the 12th century could be surmised with little evidence that it lasted long after that. As noted above, there is little evidence of occupation at the Manor House at that time, suggesting that the Motte could pre-date the Manor House.

If that is correct, then the Motte could have been the first installation that Arnald de Percy had built on his arrival in Kildale but soon afterwards decided it was too exposed and that

the site of the Manor House was a much better choice! This might explain the lack of pottery from anywhere else on the Motte except for the entrance.

How the post-holes and burning hollows fit in with this early abandonment is unclear. Perhaps they got as far as building the gatehouse and decided to burn it down and throw away any unwanted jars when the change of site took place.

One Carbon 14 sample has yet to be explained. This was found in one of the post-holes of the line of post-holes in gully 1 found in Trench 2 in 2017. From the lower plan, it can be seen that it pre-dates the Medieval activity on the motte by 1600 years!



EASBY MOTTE - Trench 2 - Plan 2

This date together with a piece of rusty iron slag from gully 2 in Trench 1 from 2016, clearly indicate an occupation on the site during the early Iron Age when they seem to have erected a stake palisade, which was later replaced, across the end of the spur.

There is no doubt that outer ditches (ditch Trench 1 and ditch trench 2) and probably the outer perimeter ditch of the Motte were dug during the Medieval period (evidenced by the C14 and pottery).

From the upper plan, the gullies appear to terminate well short of the Motte's outer ditch. This could mean one of two things. Either both the Motte and the gullies are Iron Age and the gullies were a palisade screen in front of a small hillfort, or there was no Motte and the gullies were a stand-alone palisade, in two different phases, giving a rather ineffectual partial screen across the spur. The geophysical survey showed no features immediately inside the palisade such as ring ditches.

Another anomaly is that the gully in Trench 2 consists of stake-holes whereas the gully in Trench 1 has a box section profile without any signs of stakes. It is possible that the stakes were packed by stones or sat on a horizontal beam. Perhaps there were two different teams working on either side of the entrance gap!

There are some examples of palisade enclosures from other parts of the country but usually associated with stock control (e.g. West Perry, Cambridgeshire).

Yet another anomaly to consider is that the volume of the ring mound exceeds the volume of the material produced by the excavation of the perimeter ditch. Is it possible that there was some sort of natural mound at the end of the spur which was reshaped by people in either the Iron Age or early Medieval periods.

If the Motte was originally built during the Iron Age and re-occupied in the Medieval period, then some Iron Age pottery should have been found somewhere either in the outer ditch or inside the ring-mound but none was found.

Unfortunately, the excavation has thrown up more questions than answers which is often the case!

This paper is dedicated to all those members of the Hidden Valleys Community Project who gave their time and so much effort into trying to solve the riddle of the Motte.

Our thanks go to David and Helen Hurren of Borough Farm who readily gave us permission to excavate and helped us throughout.

Our thanks also to the North York Moors National Park Authority who funded the geophysical survey and to the North Yorkshire County Council.