Home Office
NORTHERN FORENSIC SCIENCE LABORATORY
Government Site, Broadway West, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE 3
Telephone: Gosforth 58191

Murder in about 1070 A.D. at Cunecastre, County Durham.

On 15th August, 1965, I went to the Grammar School at Chester.le.Street where human remains had been found during building excavations under the school hall.

These remains consisted of an almost complete human skull and a large number of fragments of bones, many identifiable as human (2 individuals) along with the end of a rather large animal long bone and the right mandible of a horse. All appeared to have been located together at a depth of about 6 - 8 feet below the school floor. This depth of soil was all quite black and formed a pattern which one would expect to find in the Fens rather than County Durham, this area must, therefore at sometime have been frequently flooded by the river.

Examination of these bones indicated that they were substantially more than 500 years old and probably not older than 1,000 years. I passed this information to Detective Constable Copinger suggesting that something like 800 years, about 1100 - 1200 A.D. would probably be about right.

At this point Mr. Copinger took up the investigation with the aid of old maps, local historians and the like and gave me the following information. The location of these bones would have been close by or underneath the Deanery which was built in 1286 A.D. Since it is unlikely that any Dean would permit a burial under or immediately beside his front-door step one can assume that the burial was significantly earlier. The church which is close by is, even so, too far away for us to accept this grave as being part of the official church-yard burial area and it is unlikely that the monks would have knowingly used a disused grave yard as a site for their new Deanery.

The monks having fled from Holy Island had established themselves in this location in 883 under Bishop Eardulph who built a church on the site of the present church as a shrine for St. Cuthbert's body. In 995 A.D. Bishop Aldune and the Community fearing Danish invasion, left Chester.le.Street with St. Cuthbert's remains and established themselves at Durham. The church was then left in the charge of one monk. In 1045 Bishop Elgeric of Durham ordered the building of a stone church.

In 1069 William I met with considerable trouble in the North of England, there are legends of a battle at Gateshead Fell and during the same year Robert de Comines the newly appointed Norman Earl of Durham was murdered along with his 700 followers in this area.

Things must have settled down considerably by 1286 when Bishop Bek raised the status of the Church to Collegiate Church (i.e. having a Chapter but no See) and in consequence the Deanery was built. This building remained until early in the present century.

This brief history brackets the period when I estimate that the bodies were buried. We have the bones of a horse and two people not buried in a recognised grave yard at a time when, Saxons even if murdered would have been buried openly in an official grave yard and hence not along with a horse. Discovery of the murder of Normans would undoubtedly have lead to severe reprisals hence it is not unreasonable to suppose that 2 murdered Normans and at least one horse would be buried in an out of the way area and where the soil was deep, peaty and easily worked. It would have needed a very large hole.

23rd June, 1967.

Norman Lee. Principal Scientific Officer.
B.Sc. F.L.S.
(NORMAN ROBERT LEE)