July 2012 saw a team from the University of Sheffield, lead by Dr Hugh Willmott and Pete Townend, return to the monastery of Thornton Abbey, Lincolnshire. The research project was continuing to examine the reuse of the monastery during and after the Dissolution. The site went through several hands after the Dissolution, the most famous being Sir Vincent Skinner, although other notables included Bishop Rans of Lincoln, and Sir Richard Tyrwhitt. The plan was to go larger than last year, with bigger and more numerous trenches, and more survey. More work meant a larger team, including a number of undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Sheffield. This was not our only source of diggers though, as there were many volunteers and students from across Britain and further afield, with volunteers from Croatia, Norway, Switzerland, Spain, USA, Puerto Rico, and as far away as Australia.

An Easter session of geophysics by an intrepid band in often demoralising rain had manage to survey almost the entirety of the inner precinct with magnetometry and resistivity, and a host of interesting targets were available for the summer excavation. The surveying was continued during July, aiming to finish off the geophysical survey of the central monastic area. Both the magnetometry and resistivity surveys were continued, with the survey covering a strip to the north of the abbey, the fields to the south of the standing inner precinct wall, as well as in the abbey itself. We also had two Trimble GPS rover units and several total stations, mostly
employed carrying out a topographic survey of the entire inner precinct, as well as other selected locations, to allow the creation of a 3D model of the site. The work carried out in the survey was often tough, with frequent rain and a lot of clambering through undergrowth, but the results looked great and will be decisive in targeting the trenches for 2013 and understanding the site as a whole.

Despite the poor weather for much of the month, the various trenches threw up many interesting finds and intriguing questions. Leaving the most intriguing to last, I shall begin with Trench D, which targeted the eastern portion of a rectangular anomaly, detected by strong signals in both the magnetometry and resistivity, and in the topographic survey. Based on initial results, this area was thought to be the stables for Sir Vincent Skinner’s house. Unfortunately for the many volunteers who had to carry out some rather backbreaking rubble removal, the geophysical anomaly related to 20th century demolition and backfilling. No truly secure archaeology was found, although the possibility of a wall to the south and a bank to the north suggest a building was located here. As such, Trench D was closed down after two weeks.

More promising was Trench E, targeted on a series of anomalies in the geophysics that suggested a building just to the northwest of the abbey entrance. This trench was beloved by the resident sheep, which couldn’t seem to stay away. Upon opening the trench we quickly revealed spreads of building rubble, mostly brick but with the occasional chunk of worked stone. As these numerous layers of demolition were peeled off walls and ground surfaces were revealed, as well as a probable bread oven. The trench revealed a multi-purpose area, with the building itself probably a Dissolution or post-Dissolution phase bakehouse, with grave slabs
very similar to those still in the north transept of the Abbey used as a floor surface. Outside the bakehouse a small lead kiln for melting down lead window came was found. The evidence for the recycling of items in the Dissolution was reinforced by lumps of melted lead found scattered across the trench, a concentration of broken Medieval window glass and small pieces of window came to the east and a significant number of copper alloy objects, including numerous pins, rivets, buckles and even a woman’s hair ornament. The building itself appears to have been multiphase with a slight shift in alignment and possible brick insertions into what may have been a stone bottomed timber framed building. Excavation was halted at the medieval layers underneath, but intriguingly other floor surfaces were observed lower down and an earlier medieval building underneath would not be out of the question.

Trench F was further to the south of Trench E, examining the square garden showing up on the geophysics to the west of the cloister. Although this trench showed us what we had hoped was there, it still held some surprises. A cobbled path, matching up with the cross shown on the geophysics, was located, and to the north of the path bands of gravel, probably ornamental garden features in between foliage. The trench was extended to the south to identify what we thought was the garden wall. Instead the high resistance feature turned out to be a ditch full of building rubble, although it still seems to have acted as the boundary to the garden. Life was not easy in Trench F with the high water table, caused by the wettest summer months for many years and frequent rain, meaning the trench frequently needed to be bailed out. However, further excavation indicated that there may have been other garden, or even monastic, features below the later garden soil. The location of a garden such as this strongly suggests that the Tyrwhitt house, one of the earlier owners of the abbey post-Dissolution, was located in the cloister.

Trench G, to the east of the abbey, hoped to clarify a large oval anomaly seen in aerial photos and very clear in the magnetometer and resistivity survey, as well as date the bank running just to the west of the Skinner Beck. Cheered on by two anti-social cows, the team quickly revealed a revetted bank, which seems to have been originally constructed in the medieval period but was maintained and built up in the post-Dissolution period. It also partially answered the question as to what the large oval anomaly was. A 1950s Ministry of Works excavation, clearing out the Abbey interior, appears to have dumped the spoil, including any broken pottery, into
holes and depressions across the site, including the one clipped by Trench G. Aerial photography suggests the oval anomaly was earlier that 1940s but the depth of material made it impossible to excavate more than a small portion safely.

Of the trenches opened last year, we only returned to Trench C, located at the north of the abbey precinct, although the focus had shifted slightly to the south, looking inside the parlour of the Skinner house. Also in the Skinner house was Trench H, opened a week into the excavation, looking at the south west frontage of the house. Trenches C and H were certainly the most intriguing of the trenches excavated this year, for one main reason; they proved there was no house. What had for many decades been assumed to be Skinner’s first house in fact seems to be the initial construction phase of his second, never completed house. Although the foundation trenches are there, and Trench H showed possible evidence for floor layers and some construction work, there were virtually no signs of habitation, virtually no building rubble associated with a collapsed building, only a few pieces of dressed stone, and no window glass. There was little sign of anything you would associate with a lived in house. However, there was evidence for an earlier medieval building underneath the floor plan for the second Skinner house. Although a frustrating discovery after weeks of excavation hoping to find occupation and demolition, it is a very important discovery (or non-discovery if you will), since this set of earthworks had always been assumed to be the first house and associated with an undated architectural plan. Now we know the plan was never implemented, and changes the understanding of the layout of the inner precinct of the monastery in the post-Dissolution period.
All in all, 2012 was a very successful season of excavation at Thornton Abbey, despite the best attempts of the weather and the local farmyard animals to hold us back. Although some of the anomalies turned out to be modern disturbance, others were clearly on the mark, with evidence for recycling of monastic stonework and metals, landscaping of the precinct for leisure activities and new buildings, and the maintenance of older medieval features into the post-medieval period. The excavation even rewrote the history of the site, disproving the long held views over Sir Vincent Skinner’s houses. But it does beg one very large question: where was the first Skinner house? A few possibilities remain, but I think that will be a story for 2013.

*Photographs by Claire Finn*

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