



Not only Winter Camps

A new site in Northumberland and Viking interactions with local networks and people

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Introduction

Research at Repton, Torksey and Aldwark has changed interpretations of late-9th century Viking activity in England. The Great Army is no longer understood as a single raiding force. Instead, increasingly, emphasis is placed on mobility, exchange and economic, social and political interaction by smaller Scandinavian groups (Williams 2020). Yet research remains focused on winter camps and subsequent settlement, with less attention paid to the Anglo-Saxon places which attracted Scandinavian groups.

After the Great Army divided following overwintering in Repton in 873/874, Halfdan led one group north to overwinter ‘on the Tyne’ (Whitelock 1961). Later sources and archaeological finds indicate continued Scandinavian movement through England and Scotland beyond identified camps (Hadley & Richards 2018). Based on metal detected finds, East Thirston, Northumberland, was first interpreted as a temporary Great Army camp associated with Halfdan’s raids north (Kershaw et al. 2023). Excavation by Community Archaeology North CIC from 2021-2026 confirms later 9th-century Scandinavian connections but provides little evidence for settlement or military encampment. Instead, buildings and material culture identify a long-standing key location for meeting, negotiation and exchange from Romano-British times, and a significant early- to middle-Anglo-Saxon productive centre within a riverine estate (Harrison 2022; 2023).

What brought travelling Scandinavian-linked groups to East Thirston in the late-9th century?

East Thirston’s attraction to Scandinavian groups lay in its long-established reputation founded on connectivity, specialist production, exchange and negotiation. East Thirston therefore illustrates how pre-existing Anglo-Saxon economic and political landscapes influenced Scandinavian mobility and interaction in Bernicia.

Landscape Setting & Connectivity

- On a visually prominent headland with light sandy soils, south of the River Coquet, surrounded on three sides by Thirston Burn, a tributary of the Coquet; extensive views north to Felton and east to the coast.
- A key node in Northumbrian road and riverine communication networks dating from the Roman period:
 - Dere Street connecting to the Tyne Valley, with onward links to Solway, Ireland and Scotland and the Devil’s Causeway.
 - Felton is key river crossing with North Sea access via the Coquet, navigable by shallow-draught boats.

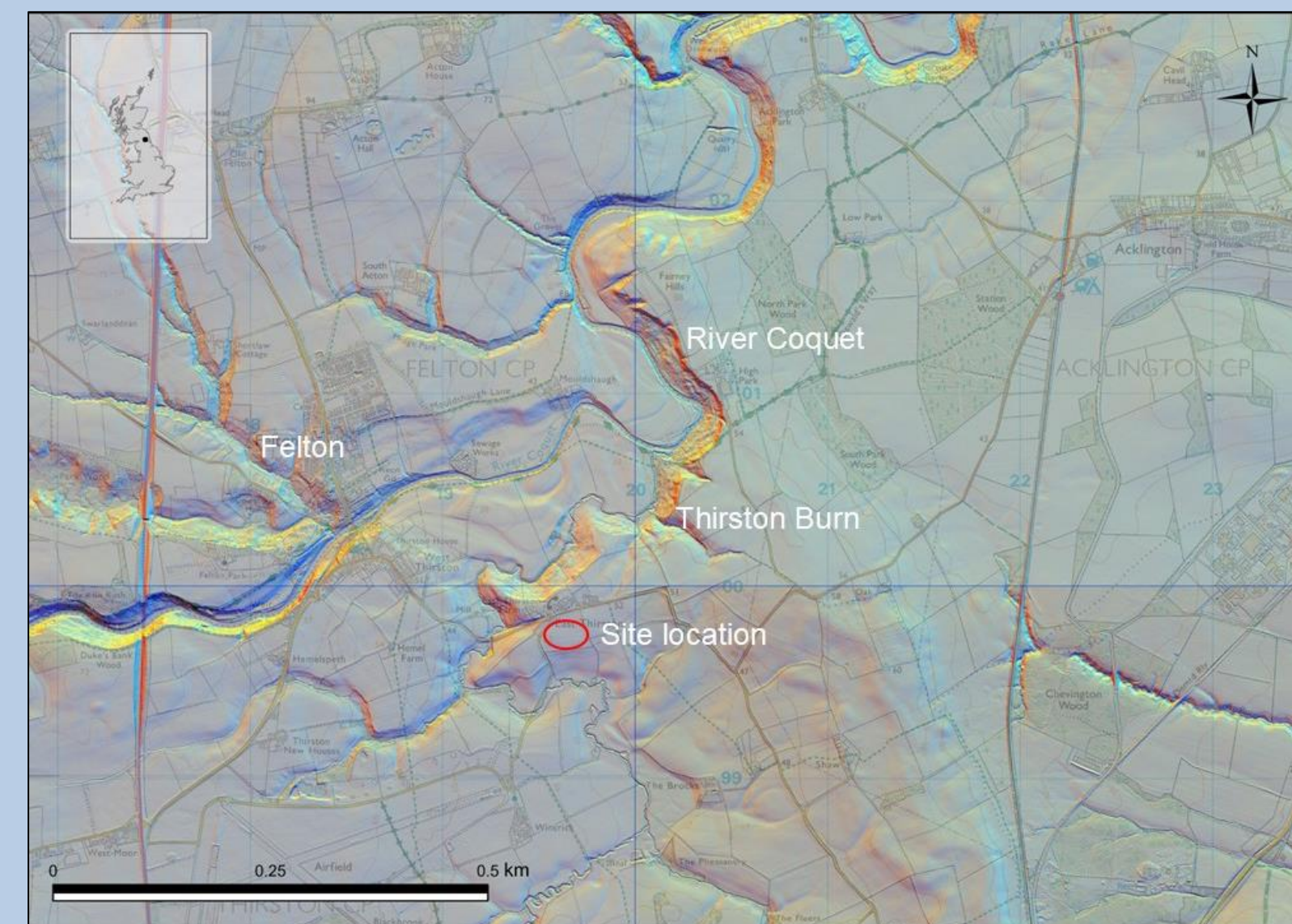


Figure 1 East Thirston: topography and communication links

A Persistent, Productive Place

Archaeological evidence demonstrates that East Thirston accumulated social and economic importance from the Roman period onwards. Trading and craft activities established it as a long-lived Anglo-Saxon landscape of communication, administration and production (Blair 2018). Comparable rural estate centres at Little Carlton and Flixborough show how production, exchange and authority could converge (Loveluck 1998; Willmott & Wright 2021).

During the sixth and seventh centuries, the site formed part of a Bernician landscape of royal and ecclesiastical centres. Ad Gefrin, c.35 miles north, was a focus of royal authority and assembly. East Thirston was a specialist estate centre producing heavyweight textiles, probably canvas for sails or tents, both required by peripatetic royal courts (Harrison 2023).

Thirston was part of a riverine estate granted by King Ceolwulf to the Community of St Cuthbert at Lindisfarne, later alienated by King Osberht and held until his defeat in 867 (O’Brien et al. 2018). The estate thus effectively came under Scandinavian control. By this period, East Thirston was a centre of iron smelting. Scandinavians would have recognised a landscape of specialism: royal, productive, exchange and ecclesiastical.

Familiar Economic Landscapes

East Thirston can be considered within Sindbæk’s (2007) model of Viking trade networks organised around nodal points. Scandinavians travelling through Bernicia, on the way to raids or trading goods, met familiar systems of organised production, specialist craft and trade.

Recent excavation at Sølften, near Aarhus, has revealed a large-scale Viking Age textile production centre linked to wider trading networks. While full excavation reports are not yet available, it demonstrates a specialised rural production landscape, beyond coastal trading centres, with interesting similarities to East Thirston.

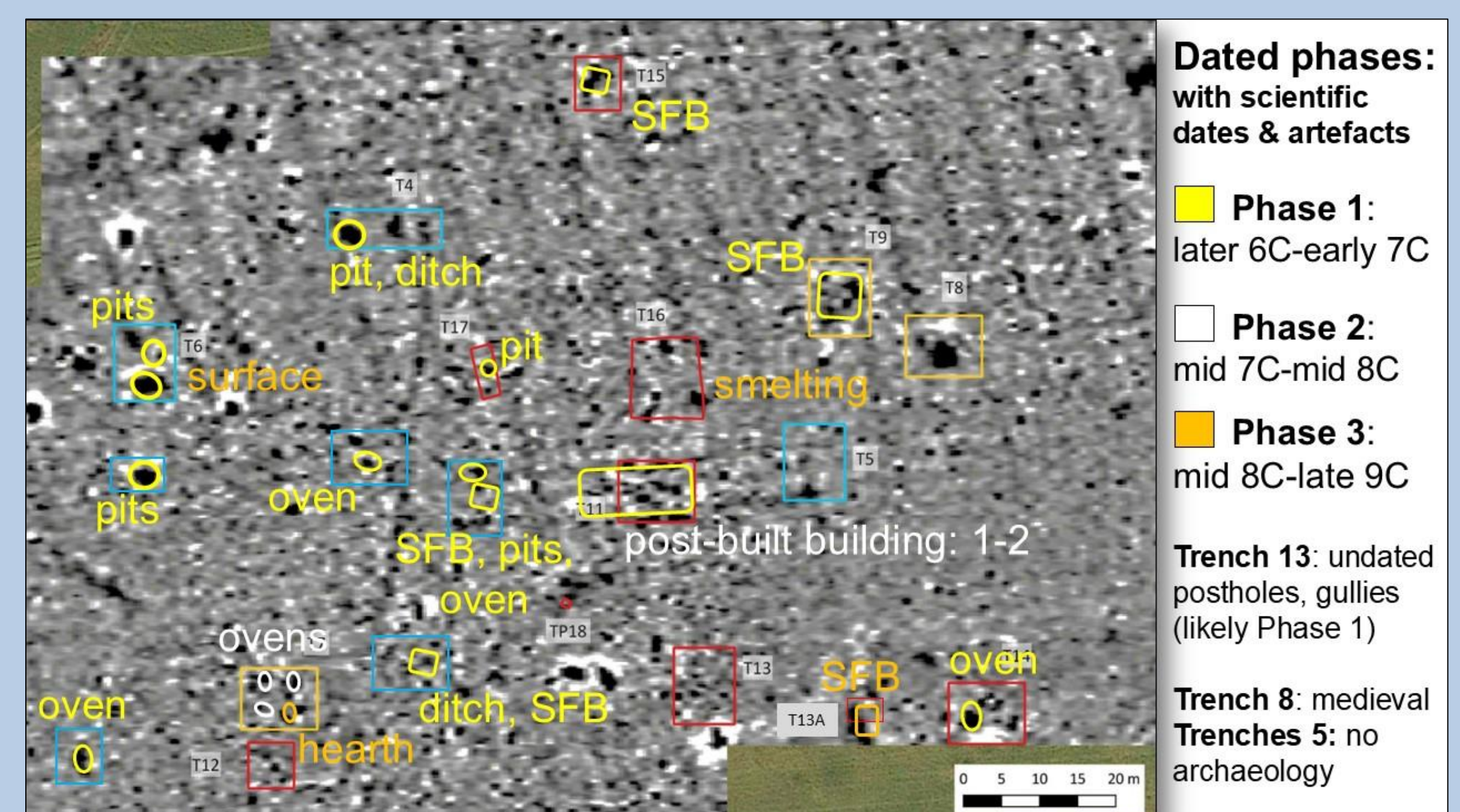


Figure 3 East Thirston: site phasing and key features

Conclusion

East Thirston illustrates patterns of Viking movement and interaction in Bernicia beyond raids and Winter Camps. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* places smaller bands in the area in 874-875; *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* reports ‘Danes on the Tyne’ into the 880s. East Thirston attracts them as an established meeting, trade and production site.

By the late-6th century East Thirston was already part of a wider rural economic and social landscape of estates and royal authority which would later be readily understood by Vikings. In the 9th century these established landscapes shaped Viking-linked interactions with local people. These interactions were not necessarily equitable but suggest exploitation of local resources and systems rather than military raiding.

Interaction rather than Occupation

The small late-9th century Scandinavian-linked assemblage (stycas, strap ends, lead gaming pieces and weights) and absence of evidence for 9th-century buildings suggest trade or exchange, rather than settlement or military domination.

East Thirston was exploited by Scandinavian groups for its resources, and trade and exchange would have relied on cooperation with the communities operating the iron smelting site.



Figure 5 East Thirston: elements from the late-9th century Scandinavian assemblage

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