

WERE THE NUNS OF ARMATHWAITE MEDIAEVAL FORGERS?

Harry Hawkins recently gave a fascinating talk on a topic he had thoroughly researched to members of Penrith and North Lakes U3A. His interest in local history led to his pursuit of finding out all he could about the 'nuns of Armathwaite', including their legitimacy. He first established the location of the nunnery, north west of Kirkoswald and actually closer to Staffield and Ruckcroft than to Armathwaite. An eighteenth century building is now on the site of the former nunnery which dated back to the pre-12th century period and was dissolved, or closed down, in 1537.

On the site of the nunnery remains of the 13th century buildings can still be found. Harry has also traced the sequence of the owners or leaseholders of the buildings on the site from the dissolution of the nunnery to the present day, with family names such as Graham, Lowther and the Aglionby represented. A number of the audience could recall visiting 'Nunnery Walks' with the hotel and its café a popular place to enjoy at weekends. However, delving into the history of the nuns has proved to be more difficult,



especially establishing the veracity of their foundation and their rights to hold land. Were the nuns the legal holders of their lands? Was there a formal foundation of their establishing a religious house there?

In the 1470s it was discovered that the nuns had no records of their lands and rights and so they petitioned the king for letters patent. The Patent Rolls of 1480 confirmed that a charter for the foundation of the nunnery had been issued by William II in 1088. However, in the 19th century further doubt was cast on the legitimacy of the nunnery as the Patent Rolls were dismissed as forgeries. This was the next question to be answered. One way of seeking an answer might be in the very name of 'Armathwaite,' the parish in which the nunnery was established.

'Erm-thwaite' literally means 'Hermit's clearing,' implying a hermit or group of hermits lived there. Both men and women through the ages and across several religions have lived out their lives and followed God's calling in hermitages. Some can be regarded as early nunneries. There are other local examples at 'Calgath', now Culgaith, and at Wragmire, near Low Hesketh. So it seems that possibly the Armathwaite nunnery began as a hermitage. Links with Wetheral Priory have also been mooted. A further useful source comes from the work of Dugdale who collected charters from the time of the dissolution. He suggested that the nunnery at that stage had somewhere between 3 and 6 nuns only. Names of prioresses there have also been identified: Katherine Lancastre, Agnes Derwentwater and Alice de Culwen.

In conclusion, it is most likely that the nunnery near Armathwaite existed, was legally established and that their records were not forgeries. For some, the closing of the Nunnery Walks is regrettable as is the absence of its café with delicious scones. Harry answered a range of interesting questions very helpfully and was warmly applauded for an excellent talk.