Excavating an archaeologist: Brian Hope-Taylor at Bamburgh

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Figure 1. *Modern excavations by the Bamburgh Research Project in progress on the site of Hope-Taylor's Cutting A, 2002.*

Introduction

Bamburgh Castle, a promontory fort in north-east Northumberland, is known to have been a major centre of the Northumbrian royal house from the sixth to the ninth centuries AD and a focus for an aristocratic family, that ruled in the far north of England with something akin to vice regal status from the end of the ninth century until the eleventh century AD. Bamburgh then became an English royal castle until it passed into private ownership at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The great archaeological potential of the site prompted the establishment of the Bamburgh Research Project (BRP) in 1996 (Figure 1).

Prior to the foundation of the BRP the site had been investigated by Dr Brian Hope-Taylor, who excavated at Bamburgh between 1959 and 1961 and again between 1970 and 1974. He described the first phase of work in two short articles in the *University of Durham Gazette*, which covered the excavation of a trial trench in the centre of the west ward (Hope-Taylor 1960), and two further trenches outside the castle gate (Hope-Taylor 1962). The archaeological potential of the site clearly captured Hope-Taylor's imagination as he returned to Bamburgh in 1970 for four further seasons. Sadly this phase of investigation was never completed and no publication had resulted at the time of his death in January 2001.



Figure 2. *Brian Hope-Taylor's site hut in the castle, abandoned 1974 and re-discovered in 2001.*

When the Bamburgh Research Project was founded, Dr Hope-Taylor was far from well and contact with him comprised a single phone conversation in 1998. A tantalising hint of his discoveries was available though, via an audiotape sold in the castle shop, in which Hope-Taylor described the complex stratigraphy

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of the west ward. A limited collection of finds was also present within the castle museum. These included bronze strap-ends and a small decorated gold plaque, the famous Bamburgh Beast, that indicated the site's potential richness.

The need to understand and expand on the work started by Dr Hope-Taylor featured very substantially in the BRP project design. However no records were available to even identify the size and location of the trenches and it required ground penetrating radar survey and a trial trench to locate the 1970s excavation in June 2001.

Recovery of the Hope-Taylor archive



Figure 3. *Brian Hope-Taylor's store room.*

Dr Hope-Taylor died in January 2001 following a prolonged illness. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland, supported by English Heritage, intervened to rescue the archaeological archives present in Dr Hope-Taylor's apartment. Finds from the Bamburgh excavation and a digital copy of the records was returned to the castle in 2006.

In the same year as Dr Hope-Taylor's death an important discovery was made at the castle. A series of rooms in the landward wall were investigated to see if they could provide accomodation for the excavation. The southernmost of the rooms contained a series of desks and chairs together with a kettle, milk bottle and a copy of the *Daily Telegraph*, dated to 1974 (Figures 2 and 3). The date of the newspaper coincided with Hope-Taylor's last excavation season and it was clear that here was part of Hope-Taylor's site arrangements.

The next door led to a single room that contained tools and a series of palaeoenvironmental samples. The most intriguing items were four plaster casts, three taken from an archaeological surface and the fourth a single hoof print. An accompanying letter from a local farmer, Charles Baker-Cresswell, to Brian Hope-Taylor described the difficult operation of encouraging a bullock to step in wet plaster. It also included the slaughterhouse certificate for the animal that provided the specimen hoof print.

The final room contained numerous boxes of finds from the 1970-74 excavation. In total the material archive from Hope-Taylor's Bamburgh excavations is contained within 120 museum boxes.

What we now know

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The Hope-Taylor archive and the excavation and recording by the BRP allows a basic understanding of the previous work. It is clear that during 1959 to 1960 two trial trenches were excavated within the central part of the west ward (BHT Trenches 1 and 1A). Trench 1 was re-excavated and recorded by the BRP in 2006, its interpretation aided by still legible labels left in the section by Dr Hope-Taylor. This trench was of particular interest as the gazette article mentioned the recovery of two swords and an axe (Hope-Taylor 1960).



Figure 4. *Hope-Taylor's trenches, as located and re-excavated by the Bamburgh Research Project.*

Sadly none of the tags marked their location. However in 2007 the section drawing of the trench, which included the clearly marked find spots, was discovered within another site archive amongst the Hope-Taylor collection held by the RCAHMS. The swords were returned to the castle with the other small finds and a recent x-ray has proved both to be pattern welded. Trench 1A was later incorporated into the 1970 open area excavation (HT Cutting A). Further 'cuttings', B, C, D and E were subsequently excavated radiating down slope from the windmill mound, sampling the northern half of the west ward in 1971 (Figure 4).

It is clear that Hope-Taylor's work at Bamburgh was both extensive and systematic, and that a substantial archive has survived, albeit in a far from complete condition. The attempt to understand Dr Hope-Taylor's work at Bamburgh has proved a fascinating and frustrating process. He was a hugely gifted archaeologist but excavated in a manner very different to that used today. Integrating the material archive with the surviving records and the stratigraphy will be a challenging undertaking, but the outstanding quality of the site will certainly make the completion and publication of this work a worthwhile endeavour.

References

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