

Crayke archeology – a review

The Archeology Data Service website

(<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/browser.xhtml>) shows some 71 records of excavations of various types in and around Crayke (copy attached to print version of this document). One of these refers to “Sike Spa Crayke sites 718 and 721” and is a brief record of the remains of Iron Age (c.300 BC) and Romano-British (c.150-350 AD) settlements found during preparations for the construction of a BP Teesside-to-Saltend Ethylene Pipeline (TSEP) to the north of Daffy Lane, south of the Crayke sports field, in 2000. A map showing the location and a full account of this important find is available on the ADS website at https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-1352-1/dissemination/pdf/North_Yorkshire/GL36073.pdf.

The company On-Site Archeology Ltd provides a further extensive list of excavations for the period 1997-2018, though few of these actually refer to Crayke (see their website at <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/organisationDetails.xhtml?organisationId=2619>).

The Historic England website (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/results/?searchType=NHLE+Simple&search=Crayke>) provides brief information on all listed buildings in Crayke, including some based on archeological records.

The now-disused reservoir located between the church and the castle was constructed in 1948. The only finds recorded during this work were a piece of Roman flue tile, a large saucer-shaped area of burnt material containing pig bones, and a charcoal layer of about 4ft depth. The later discovery of a piece of Roman box tile near the site has led to speculation that these may have been from a hypocaust furnace associated with a Romano-British villa, although the evidence for this is flimsy (see <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record.xhtml> and https://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=56922#aRt).

The following publications describe work from 3 separate excavations in 1937, 1956 and 1983.

1. Sheppard, T, Yorkshire Archeological Journal, Vol 34, 273-281, 1939.
(<https://archive.org/details/YAJ0341939/page/272>)
“Viking and other relics at Crayke”

This paper describes an excavation in the garden behind Crayke Hall in 1937, when the sloping ground was being levelled to build a tennis court. A circular hearth of about 6 ft (183 cm) diameter surrounded by a wall of stones was found at about 6 ft below ground. This was believed to be the remains of a potter’s kiln as fragments of pottery also were found nearby, believed to be of a 14th century design. Two other similar but smaller structures were found on the site together with some fragments of pottery of Roman origin (late 4th century, c. 370-375 AD).

No pottery fragments of Saxon date were found but a broken bronze ring, probably showing an open Greek-style cross as a Christian symbol and likely to have been a

Saxon-style pendant originally, was found. This was about 1 ¾ in (4.5 cm) in diameter and about 1/8 in (3 mm) thick and of a design dating it to the 'dark ages' (late 4th to early 7th centuries) but likely to be early 7th century.

A fine-grained sandstone arm of a pre-Norman cross also was found on the site. This measured about 7 by 6 inches and 3 inches thick (about 17.5 x 15 x 7.5 cm) and was finely carved on both sides with a vine-scroll design. Its good condition indicated that the cross was broken and buried soon after it was made, probably in the first half of the 9th century.

Among other finds were some fragments of iron work believed to date from the Viking period, including a much-corroded one-edged sword, some horse bridle bits and an axe head.

The findings were placed in the Mortimer Museum in Hull. It has been speculated that, in addition to Roman occupancy, these finds might support the hypothesis that an Anglo-Saxon monastery existed on this site and that this was destroyed by Viking raiders; however, the evidence for this is flimsy and other more mundane interpretations may be equally valid.

2. Hayes, R. H., YAJ, 40, 90-98, 1962.

(<https://archive.org/details/YAJ0401962/page/90>)

"Roman-British discoveries at Crayke. (i) Sites at Woodhouse Farm"

Colin Nelson, who was farming at Woodhouse in 1956, uncovered two beehive-type querns (used for grinding corn) when ploughing and removing large quantities of stones from a field to the south of Daffy Lane. Mrs N. Knowles of Crayke helped to examine the area and dig a few small trenches, revealing further querns and extensive patches of rough paving or cobbles at a depth of about 12 in (30 cm), along with roofing slabs and flue tiles and some pottery fragments from the 4th century. Similar finds just north of Daffy Lane were reported later, in 1958, and others from various sites around the village including Neolithic-type flints. The author speculated that the finds south of Daffy Lane might be associated with a Romano-British villa from the period 300-400 AD, containing a hypocaust (Roman under-floor heating system). This seems likely to be connected with the nearby Sike Spa site excavated in 2000 and referred to at the beginning of this document.

See also <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record?titleId=991737> for an English Heritage Pastscape record.

3. Hildyard, E. J. W., YAJ, 40, 99-111, 1962.

(<https://archive.org/details/YAJ0401962/page/98>)

"(ii) The trial excavation"

The author was persuaded by Mrs Knowles of Crayke to explore the area around the Crayke reservoir on castle hill where she had found a piece of Roman flue tile when watching the mechanical excavation and building work there in 1948. The aim was to find more evidence of Roman remains. Three small trenches were dug in 1956, the first of these 15 ft (4.6 m) to the east of the churchyard, the second 15 ft to the north of it, and the third close to the west side of the reservoir structure (see map below).

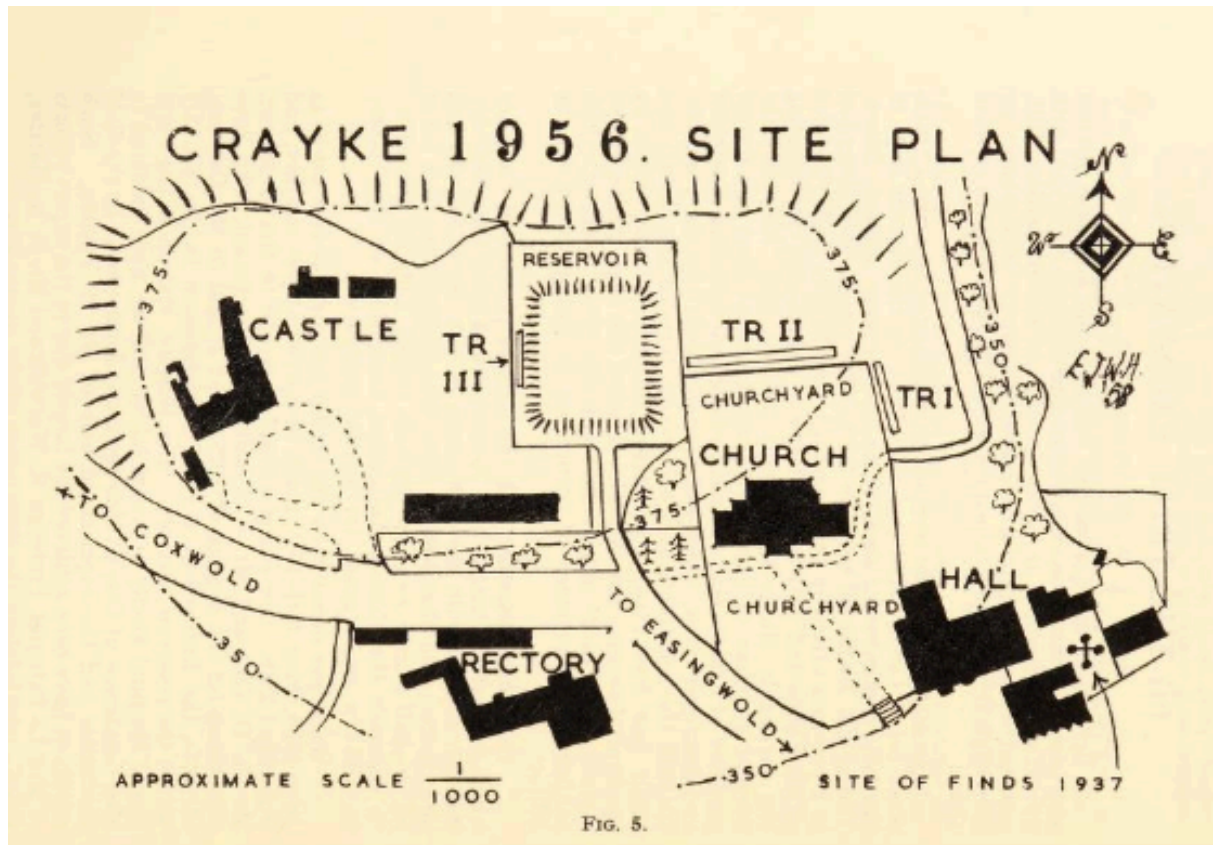


FIG. 5.

In trench I (measuring 50 by 4 ft, or about 15 by 1.2 m), at a depth of about 1.5-3 ft (46-90 cm) and below a layer of mainly 14th century pottery fragments, remains of at least 16 skeletons were found, some jumbled together with no space between them, indicating that these were not coffin burials. All were laid across the trench, with the heads to the west. Close examination indicated that most of the remains were of males of a wide range of ages, from adolescence to perhaps over 40, apart from one doubtful group in which at least one skull was identified as that of a female aged 25-30 and other skull fragments of persons of uncertain sex, aged 40-45. Their east-west orientation indicated Christian burials, perhaps indicating that the church burial ground was formerly more extensive, but their deliberate and disorderly arrangement gave an impression of haste and lack of preparation in the burials, possibly due to them being victims of the plague (such as occurred in 664-684 AD according to Bede) or some other disaster. No dates were attributed to the skeletal remains in this study beyond their burial being "at an unknown but possibly very considerable period prior to the 14th century". Careful enquiry indicated that no other early remains had been found in the churchyard during grave digging,

including on the north side where the burial area has been extended in recent times. This throws considerable doubt on the hypothesis that this might have been the site of an early Anglo-Saxon burial ground associated with a monastery.

In trench II (measuring 24 by 4ft, or about 7 by 1.2 m), apart from a scatter of mediaeval pottery, the only find of interest was a piece of box flue tile believed to derive from a Roman hypocaust.

The narrower trench III (20ft long) yielded nothing of interest.

4. Adams, K. A., YAJ, 62, 29-50, 1990.

(<https://archive.org/details/YAJ0621990/page/28>)

“Monastery and village at Crayke, North Yorkshire”

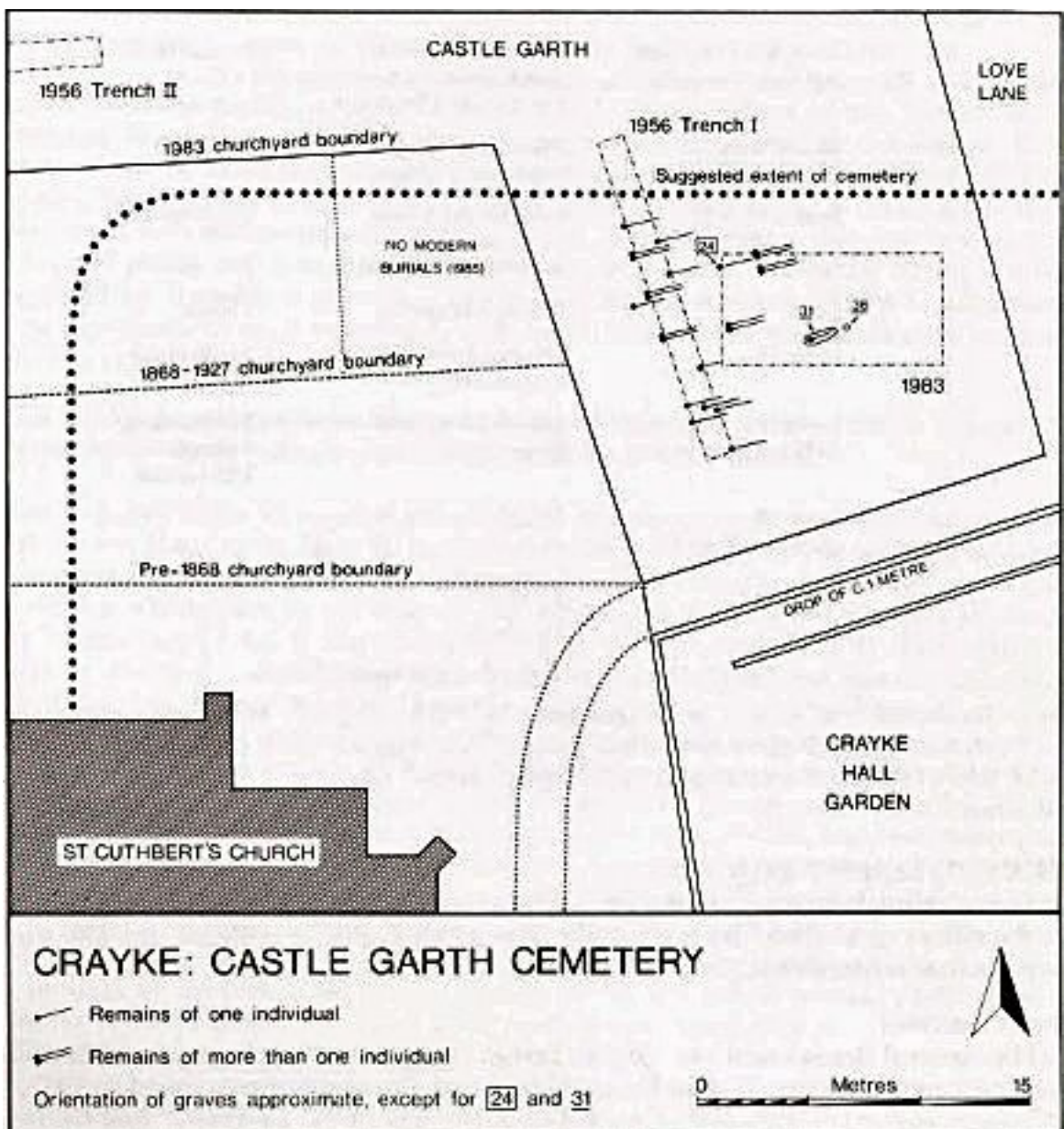
This paper is derived from a 1983 undergraduate student dissertation by the same author when he was at the University of York (the dissertation has been examined in the university library). A new trench to the east of Hildyard’s trench I from 1956 (see ref 3 above and the sketch map below) and measuring 10 x 5 m (about 33 x 16 ft) was excavated by students from the Department of Archeology in August 1983. The orientation of this 1983 trench matches that of the church. Reference is also made to some schoolboys who dug up a skull at this site in the early 1960s, as reported to the author by Derek Slater and Geoff Moverly of Crayke (personal communication).

Much fragmented mediaeval pottery (mid-13th to mid-14th century) was found in the upper layers of the new trench and further skeletal remains also were found, though fewer than in Hildyard’s work in 1956 and only one (marked as 24 on the sketch map below) was relatively intact. This was identified as that of a female aged 18-20 and was later radiocarbon dated to the period 770-1020 AD with 95% probability. The intact skeletons found in 1956 and 1983 were not aligned with the church but were laid in a direction around 75+/-5 degrees east of north while the church is oriented at 92 degrees from the north, i.e. essentially east-west, as is usual.

Most of the Adams paper is devoted to placing these findings, together with the earlier ones of Hildyard, Hayes and Sheppard (reported above), in the context of a highly speculative account of the supposed development sequence of the village as a whole. This is interesting but is largely based on sparse archival evidence, much of which is necessarily from secondary sources and may be of doubtful validity. The main points are summarised below:

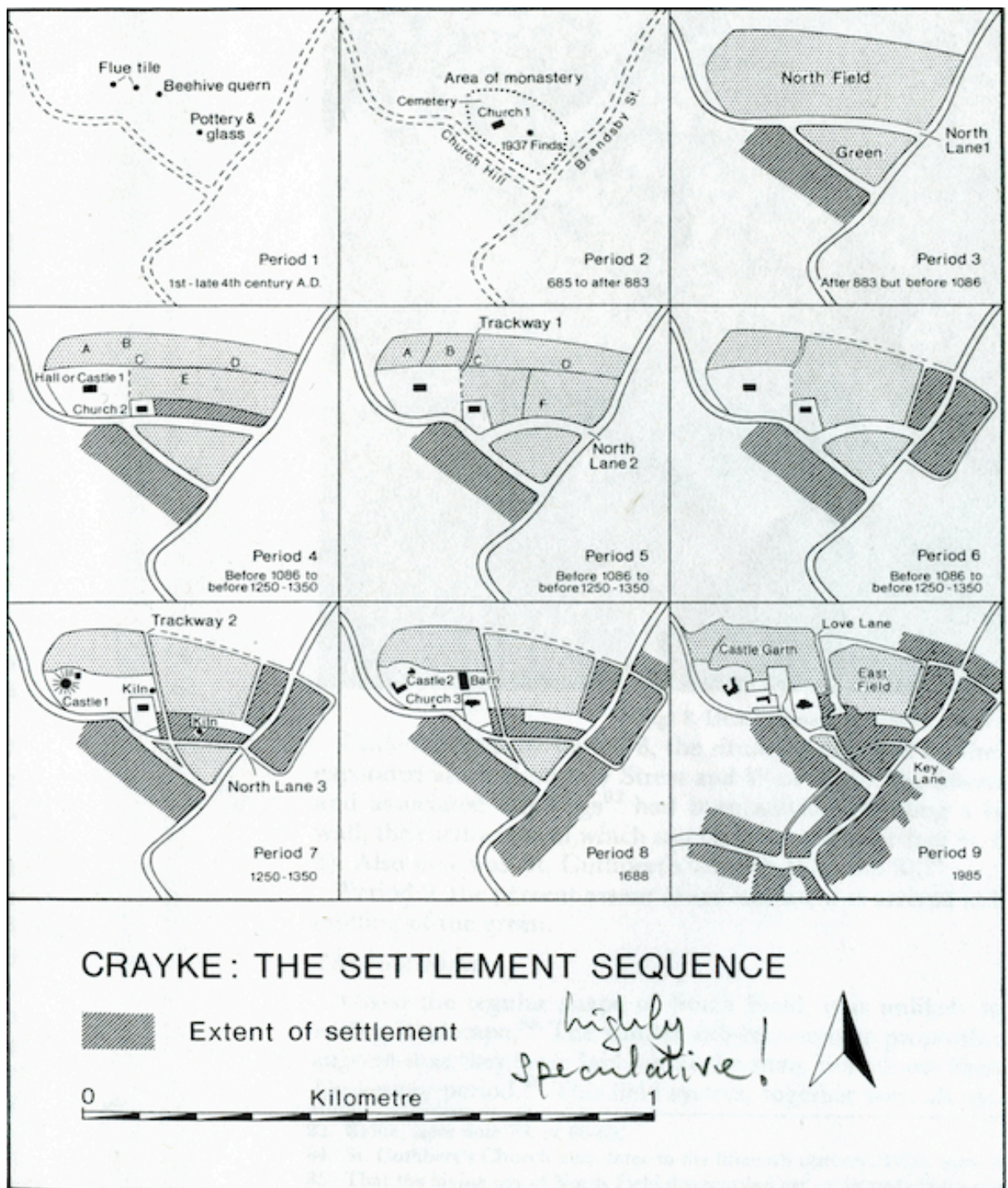
- The 1937 finding of a few small fragments of Roman pottery in the garden of Crayke Hall was combined with the single fragment of Roman flue tile found at Castle Garth to infer a Roman villa substantial enough to have a hypocaust (under-floor) heating system.
- From the misalignment of the Castle Garth graves with the present church it was inferred that an earlier church existed and was located a short distance to the south east, with an alignment similar to that of Crayke Hall.

- The dating of a single fragment of one of the skulls found to the period 770-1020 AD was insufficient in itself to constitute strong support for the idea of a graveyard from the Saxon monastic period, 685-882/3 AD, but Adams points out that the graveyard could have been in use for many years on either side of this particular burial date and thereby claims strong support for a monastic origin for the burial ground. However, as noted above in the account of Hildyard's work, alternative explanations are available, such as a collective burial of plague victims. Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History' records such an outbreak of pestilence in the north in 664-684 AD. And again, the absence of any other early remains being found in the churchyard during grave digging throws considerable doubt on the hypothesis that this might have been the site of a Saxon burial ground associated with a monastery.



- The supposed monastery has left no mark on the topography of the village but Adams imagined a settlement sequence running from the Roman period

to modern times. This is necessarily highly speculative but is shown in 9 stages as set out in the figure below. The proposed monastery was imagined to occupy the area to the south-east of the present church, encompassing essentially the whole of the village to the north and east of Church Hill (see Period 2, 685 to after 883 AD).



In his summary, Adams writes as follows:

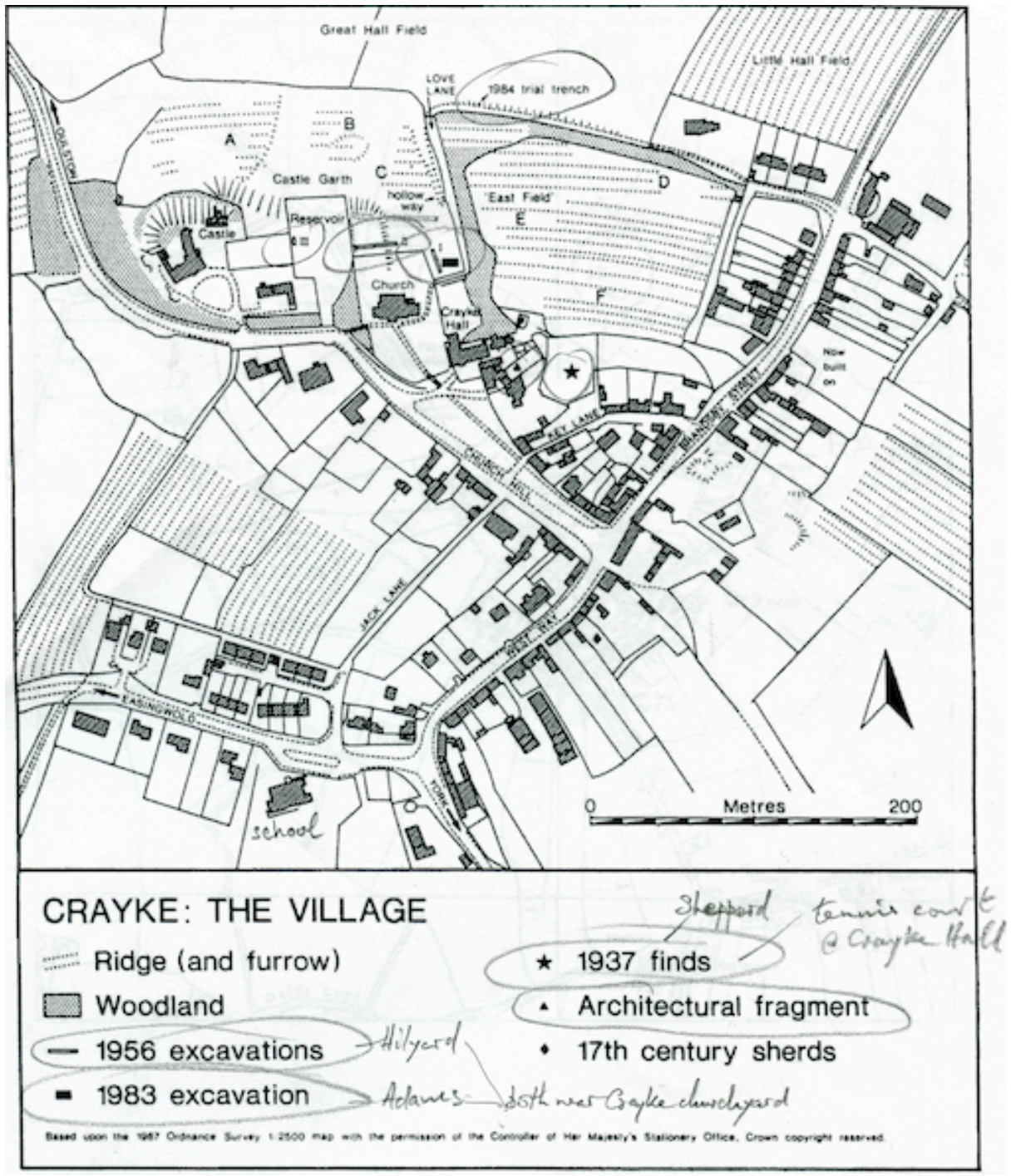
“Analysis of fieldwork, excavation, chance finds, maps, and historical sources points to a hypothetical settlement sequence. The monastery lay on the gentle south-east slope of Crayke Hill; the monastery cemetery, marked by at least one funerary monument, was on the hilltop, the church slightly downslope. Sometime after 883, the monastery was reorganised. A village with a triangular green was laid out, along with an open field system. The area formerly occupied by the monastic cemetery was incorporated into one of the new fields, for convenience termed North Field. The new village did not have a church; only later in the pre-Conquest period were a church and hall inserted in North Field, and the remainder of the field divided in two. The subsequent millennium has seen: the continued subdivision of North Field; the extension of the churchyard to the north and south; the infilling of the triangular green; and the expansion of the village along Brandsby Street, West Way, and the road to Easingwold.” His settlement sequence also supposes a succession of three distinct churches (marked as ‘Church 1’ in Period 2, 685 to after 883; ‘Church 2’ in Period 4, before 1086 to before 1250-1350; and ‘Church 3’ in Period 8, 1688) and three castles (marked as ‘Hall or Castle 1’ in Period 4; ‘Castle 1’ in Period 7, 1250-1350; and ‘Castle 2’ in Period 8)

A map of Crayke from 1688 (accredited by Adams to Tony Cliff of Crayke) is shown below:



Adams states that this is likely to date to between 1250 and 1350, as depicted in the periods 7 and 8 of his settlement sequence.

A map of Crayke based on the 1967 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map as adapted by Adams to mark the sites of the 1937, 1956 and 1983 excavations is shown below:



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