

Medieval Leper Hospitals of the North East

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Introduction

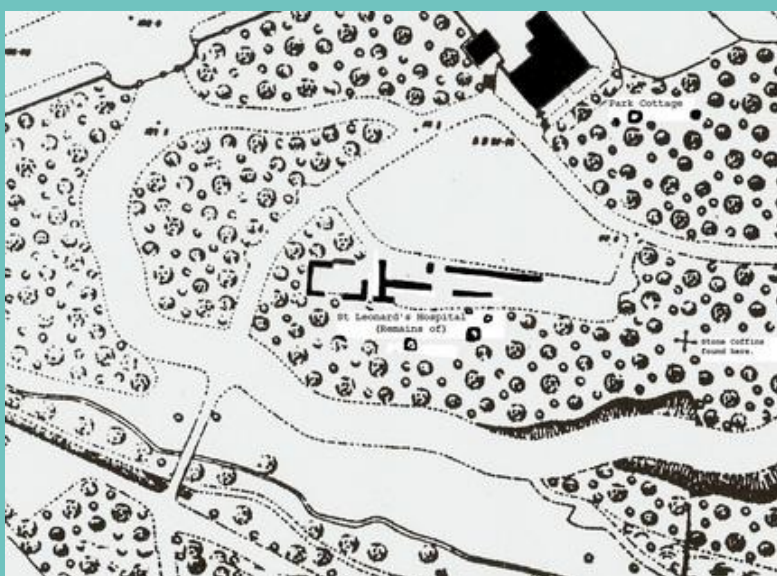
Medieval leprosy was identified by various skin conditions which produced lesions on the skin, unlike the more specific leprosy of today. It was seen as a disease of the mind, body and soul and was therefore treated as a religious, rather than medical, condition. In response to the increase of those afflicted by leprosy, hospitals were created across England. These hospitals allowed segregation from society, as the leper was seen as unclean and unholy, ultimately denied many privileges of normal life.

Known medieval leper hospitals in the North East include St. Mary Magdalene located on Barras Bridge, and Sherburn Hospital for lepers in Durham. Other Medieval hospitals have recently been identified and excavated, such as St Leonards hospital in Tynemouth.

Aims

- To examine St Leonards hospital at Tynemouth, in relation to others of the North East.
- To outline a broader and more in depth examination of leper hospitals in the North East, and investigate their visibility in the archaeological record in their regional context.
- To examine and collate existing documentary records concerning North East medieval leper hospitals.

St. Leonards Medieval hospital. The site as it looks today. The area has been mothballed to preserve the existing remains. (Photo taken June 2015)



Map of Northumberland Park produced in the 1800's, showing the position of St. Leonards hospital within its location. (Coates 2012)

Revision to aims

Throughout the early stages of my research it became apparent that not only was there no definitive list of leper hospitals in the North East, much evidence for various known hospitals was inconclusive in stating whether they treated lepers. This included my main focus, St. Leonards hospital, and therefore my aims were adjusted to fit these new problems. My main aim became to collect evidence of medieval hospitals and outline the various factors pointing to their use for leprosy or other ailments.

Conclusion

- The outcome of my project has varied from its original idea as I had to change my objectives to suit the available data and alteration in focus. It is unclear as to whether St. Leonards in Tynemouth was a Leper hospital, and although some data links it to the identifying factors, more evidence is needed confirm its function.
- It is clear that there are certain identifying factors that can be commonly used for leper hospitals. These include place names, location and links with certain Saints.
- Sherburn hospital has a wealth of information and is a useful focus and comparison site. It is an excellent example for future research.
- My research has resulted in key findings which I have summarised in a table outlining various key aspects, which give a general and succinct introduction to various North East medieval hospitals.

References

Coates, M (2012) *The Story of Northumberland Park*, Summerhill Books

Durham Community Website 2012 (<http://community.dur.ac.uk/paul.hodgkinson/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/SherburnHospitalChurch.jpg>) Accessed August 2012

Newcastle HER with thanks to County Archaeologist David Heslop

Richards, P (1977) *The Medieval Leper and his northern heirs*, D.S Brewer: Cambridge

Unpublished reports on Northumberland park and St. Leonards hospital with thanks to Richard Carlton

	Date of first use	Evidence as a medieval hospital	Leper hospital?	Evidence
St Leonards, Tynemouth	1220	Place name (Spital Dene), links with Saint.	Possible	Location
Sherburn Hospital, Durham	1181	Documents, Standing remains	Yes	Primary documents, location
St Leonards, Durham	1292	Place name	Yes	Documentary
Kepier, Durham	1112	Documents	No	N/A
Ryton, Gateshead	1242	Documents	Unknown	Documentary (only 1 doc survives)
St Edmunds, Gateshead	1244/49	Documents	No	N/A
St Mary Magdalene, Newcastle	1100's approx	Original foundations, documents	Yes	Documents



Artistic depiction of a medieval leper (Richards 1977)



Sherburn Leper Hospital as it stands today (Durham Community website 2012)