

Medieval Lowther

Summary

The Medieval Lowther project explores the origins of the Lowther estate and its place in Cumbrian, British and global history c.700-1300, with the goal of revealing findings to visitors. Whilst the picturesque ruins of Lowther's 19th-century castle are amongst the Lake District's most popular attractions, few realise that, in the parkland just to the north, stands a medieval site potentially of national, even international, significance. The Medieval Lowther project combines history and archaeology to uncover the story of the north park: its medieval church (St Michael's), a religious site dating to 8th century or earlier; its Norman ringwork castle and attached medieval village; and, from 2026, the fort overlooking the site from across the river (potentially Viking age). Research suggests that, between 8th and 11th centuries, Lowther housed a rich and elaborate religious site, perhaps patronised by the King of Cumbria. In 1092, the Normans conquered Cumbria; it was perhaps Lowther's political significance that led them to destroy the early church and build a castle and Norman church in the north park. They attached a village to their castle, perhaps as part of the colonisation of Cumbria, and the village flourished until it was cleared in the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, the Lowther family and men of Cumbria played a key part in the Anglo-Scottish wars. Medieval Lowther thus stood at the crossroads of Britain, both geographically and historically. Our site provides critical evidence of a pivotal but little-documented era in the making of Britain. Ultimately, the Medieval Lowther project seeks to bring this story to life as a major heritage attraction.

See Appendix for images and maps.

Research

The Medieval Lowther research project sees its fourth season in 2026. The project combines history and archaeology – critical in a region where medieval material culture and documentation are sparse. With support from regional and national funders, historians from Lancaster University and archaeologists from the University of Lancashire have used varied techniques and sources: geophysical surveys and, in autumn 2026, a Ground Penetrating Radar survey of the church and churchyard, to reveal what's hidden below ground; excavations of the ringwork castle and village and (in 2026) the 'Yanwath Fort' in Yanwath Wood north of the river (potentially a Viking fort overlapping in its era of use with the early medieval church); a commissioned survey of early medieval stone sculpture discovered at St Michael's church; and the written sources documenting Cumbria's medieval history, including the Lowther family's medieval charters. In line with LCGT's remit, education and community are integral. Excavations provide training for archaeology students. In the 2025 dig, they were joined by learners from the New Leaf Centre (Penrith), which supports children and young people with SEND and SEMH challenges, and volunteers from the Lake District National Park Archaeology Volunteer Network.

Historical Overview: Medieval Cumbria

Cumbria's medieval history doesn't fit with the national story familiar from school lessons. We all know the Normans conquered England in 1066 – but this isn't quite true. William the

Conqueror seized the kingdom ruled by Harold Godwinson: the Anglo-Saxon state, whose heartlands lay in Wessex and London. Beyond the limits of Harold's rule, in what is now Cumbria and north Lancashire, lay the Kingdom of Cumbria. This kingdom was not conquered by William in 1066 – it mostly remained independent for another generation. Only in 1092 did William's son, King William II (William Rufus) annex the southern part of the Cumbrian kingdom to the English state, extending Norman rule in the North West to Hadrian's Wall.

The Kingdom of Cumbria emerged in 9th century. Its lands were once part of the mighty Kingdom of Northumbria, which in its heyday of 7th-8th centuries stretched from the Mersey to the Humber estuary in the south, and from Ayrshire to the Firth of Forth in the north. The Northumbrian kingdom cradled Christianity at Lindisfarne, the community founded by St Aidan and St Oswald, and was celebrated by its own great historian, Bede. In the 860s, Northumbria was fractured by Viking conquest. Having seized York, the Vikings established a kingdom south of the Tees, while English rulers at Bamburgh took the North East, from the Tyne to the Firth of Forth. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Strathclyde, based around Glasgow, seized the chance to expand southwards into the Lake District. In the process, a new kingdom was forged west of the Pennines: the Kingdom of Cumbria. Like its Northumbrian predecessor, it breached Hadrian's Wall, reaching from southern Scotland across the Solway Firth and into what is now Cumbria.

The Cumbrian kingdom south of Hadrian's Wall was conquered by William Rufus in 1092. Rufus' campaign brought the Norman war machine to bear on Cumbria: heavy cavalry, burning, plundering and violence, and the Norman trademark: castle building. The lone documentary record of Rufus' Cumbrian campaign, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, states that he took Carlisle 'and restored the city and built a castle' (probably a wooden forerunner of Carlisle's keep). The Chronicle then records that, 'after coming back south he sent many farmers there with their women and livestock to live there and cultivate the land.' This was a planned programme of colonisation (the settlers' identity is not recorded, though scholars have speculated they hailed from Lincolnshire). The Normans had to create government infrastructure from scratch in Cumbria, unlike the area covered by the Anglo-Saxon state. They forged the shires of Cumberland and Westmorland, although by 1130 (our next written evidence) these still weren't shires proper, being overseen by administrators rather than fully-fledged sheriffs.

In 12th and 13th centuries, society across the far North kept Scottish ties. While the King of Scots, David I (d.1153), absorbed the northern part of the old Cumbrian kingdom into Scotland, the borderland lords intermarried with the Scottish aristocracy. Monasteries on both sides led the veneration of saints of the old Northumbrian Kingdom, Aidan, Oswald and Bede. This was a cultural nexus historians have dubbed 'Middle Britain': a cross-border community. Cumberland, Westmorland and Northumberland were contested (and occasionally occupied by) Scottish kings, with some support from locals, until the current border was agreed in 1237. Still, cultural ties were intact – until the Anglo-Scottish wars, begun by Edward I of England in 1296. Lords from the far north had to choose which king to follow, while thousands of Cumbrian men were conscripted into English armies. The Scots regularly led raids into northern England, reaching as far south as Chorley. In 1314, the Scots decisively defeated the English at Bannockburn, and the Scottish parliament banned Scots from holding land in England. Middle Britain was broken.

People of Lowther

The people of early medieval Cumbria would have sounded very different to the Anglo-Saxons. Many were Brittonic speakers, their language the ancestor of modern Welsh and Cornish. Amongst them lived settlers from Viking colonies in Ireland and Scotland and the Viking kingdom of York. Viking influence is embedded in Norse placenames across Cumbria, from Scafell to Skiddaw. The blending of cultures is reflected in sculpture, such as monumental crosses and 'hogbacks', which scholars have interpreted as combining Christian and Viking imagery (though this is debated!). The varied peoples were embraced by their kingdom's title: 'Cumbria' derives from the Brittonic term 'Cymry', meaning 'inhabitants of the same region'. Even during the Anglo-Scottish wars, Cumbrians perhaps seemed different to southerners. A court case from 1306 records Elias, from Studholme, serving in Carlisle's garrison; he was sent to English-ruled Ireland to purchase victuals, where he was arrested because nobody would believe he wasn't Scottish!

We don't know who William Rufus installed at Lowther after the 1092 conquest to rule from the castle. Still, excavations are turning up evidence of life in the castle, such as cockle shells (cockles were imported quickly from the coast for conspicuous consumption) and the bones of slaughtered calves, as well as the simple local pottery. From the archaeology, it looks like the castle went out of use by 13th century; meanwhile, Lowther village flourished and expanded.

What was life like for Cumbrians across 12th-14th centuries? Evidence is patchy. The population was quite small; agriculture was very different to that of the south and there was less pressure on land. King David of Scotland temporarily annexed Cumbria and Northumberland in 12th century, and Cumbrians fought for him against the English at the Battle of the Standard (1138). In 1215 to 1216, during the civil war that followed the first issue of Magna Carta, the lords of Cumbria and Northumberland offered their shires to the King of Scots to secure his aid against King John. In 1291, when Edward I ordered English monasteries to search their archives and send him evidence to support his claim to Scotland, the monastery of Carlisle told him how Carlisle's citizens had willingly surrendered to the Scottish King in 1216! When Edward invaded Scotland in 1296, fifteen families in Cumberland chose to side with the Scots, and twenty-four in Northumberland. Edward targeted the men of Cumbria particularly for conscription to his armies, because none of his greatest magnates held land in the region, so there was nobody to object to the land being stripped of men. Many Cumbrians resisted conscription and deserted.

Still, this isn't the whole story – Hugh of Lowther, the founder of the Lowther dynasty, made his fortune serving Edward I and supporting his war. N.B. 'Lowther' isn't a Norman name, so the family's origins aren't associated with the Norman conquest of Cumbria. 'Lowther' is the name of the river running below our site. The name's origins perhaps derive from the Old Norse for 'foaming water'. Lowther village (in the north park) took its name from the river, and the family took its name from the village. This was common naming practice. In the 1280s, Hugh (son of Geoffrey) of Lowther was one of several men known as so-and-so 'of Lowther', and one of the manor's four leading landholders. Hugh made his money as a sergeant (an early form of barrister) in the central courts of King Edward I. Together with his wife Ivette, he used his earnings to build a property portfolio in and around Lowther village. By 1292/3, Hugh had become a knight. This was just in time for Edward I's war in Scotland – the king needed ambitious men from the far north and lawyers, and Hugh was both.

Hugh took part in Edward's campaign to conquer Scotland in 1296 and was then appointed sheriff of Edinburgh and placed in charge of Edinburgh castle. In August of that year, he

attended Edward's great parliament at Berwick, in which the degraded Scots were made to offer fealty and homage to the English king (he got into a scuffle with a magnate, Gilbert de Umfraville, who struck him and was later made to atone). Hugh campaigned several times against the Scots and, in 1300, was tasked with enlisting men from Westmorland. Hugh's legal skills were also needed. In 1301, he tried prisoners languishing in Cumberland gaols, and hanged a man named Robert Scot convicted of spying for the enemy. In 1306, he sat with other judges to condemn to death the Scottish prisoners taken fighting for King Robert of Scotland at the Battle of Methven. Early in 1307, Hugh was tasked with discovering which men of Westmorland had deserted the English army. Hugh thus helped the king deliver his strategy and made his family's name in the process.

Hugh's land purchases in Lowther and nearby villages leave us charters, revealing who was living in Lowther village and how the land was used. For instance, a charter from the 1280s records a grant of two acres of land in Lowther by Alice daughter of Peter of Thrimby to Hugh; Alice also quitclaims to Hugh rights in three acres and half a rood of land (there were four roods in an acre) in Lowther village. One parcel (an eighth of an acre) is described as sitting 'above the castle'. This is probably the Norman ringwork castle under investigation, which was no longer occupied but was still recognisable and used as a landmark.

Lowther's Significance

Lowther's north park is important to each of these episodes and, altogether, encapsulates how Britain was made at its medieval crossroads.

In the Kingdom of Northumbria and the successor Kingdom of Cumbria, Lowther housed an important church. We know this only from the array of early medieval stone sculpture discovered around St Michael's (pending the GPR survey in 2026!). These include monumental crosses and 'hogback' monuments; both carved and originally painted. A 2025 report by sculpture expert Dr Christina Cowart-Smith suggests the sculpture reveals 'an ecclesiastical community was active at Lowther from the later 8th through to the 11th century. Lowther ... [likely had] ties to influential secular rulers capable of patronising and commissioning the finest early medieval sculpture.' Moreover, 'Lowther was an influential centre of artistic creativity'. High crosses reveal 'Lowther's ambitious sculpture plan and ability to summon the most highly trained carvers'. One high cross ('Lowther 1', 8th/9th century), is now on display in the Great Court at the British Museum. The high cross now in the Burrell Collection ('Lowther 2', 8th-9th century) is 'exceptional in a regional and national context', featuring similarities to motifs from southern and midland England and Italy. The sculptor 'clearly had access to motifs in ... ivory, metalwork, and manuscripts', with Lowther's community showcasing links across Briton and wider Christendom. Lowther's hogback monuments (10th or 11th century) may have been tombs but their purpose is ultimately mysterious.

Lowther's sculpture is important as evidence for early medieval Cumbria, given the sparsity of sources for this period (Cumbria didn't have the rich written culture of the Anglo-Saxons and, since it wasn't conquered in 1066, doesn't appear in Domesday Book; meanwhile, the archaeological record is quite thin). But it also hints at Lowther's political importance. Who were the wealthy figures commissioning this top-quality sculpture? We can speculate. Lowther sits on the south-east border of the Kingdom of Cumbria. Very close is Eamont Bridge – seemingly an ancient assembly place where kings and warlords gathered. At the crossroads of

Britain, it's famous as the site of the 'first British assembly', hosted by King Aethelstan of the Anglo-Saxons in 927. Was Eamont Bridge the King of Cumbria's assembly site? In which case, could Lowther have been under his patronage?

Lowther's Norman castle and attached village are precious evidence for 'the second Norman Conquest'. Unlike the 1066 conquest, Cumbria's conquest of 1092 is hardly documented, while its archaeology is largely unexplored. Lowther's Norman castle is a 'ringwork': simpler than a motte and bailey, it comprises a square mound built quickly in alternating layers of earth and local stone (by forced labour?). The mound was likely surmounted by a timber palisade, its entranceway guarded by a gatehouse; its south-east corner featured a protruding mound that perhaps housed a watchtower. Inside, there was an internal courtyard, possibly with timber buildings. Attached to the ringwork is a Norman village, a street running eastward from the gatehouse, with simple buildings either side (the village later expanded to run north-south). Notably, the castle's watchtower overlooked the village, reflecting the castle's role in dominating the populace.

The castle and village are important, firstly, because they're rare survivals. Some castles were developed over the generations, so their original forms were lost, while Lowther's is preserved. Likewise, the earliest medieval villages rarely survive due to development. Secondly, together the castle and village are seemingly evidence not only of the conquest but of the colonisation of Cumbria. Did the Normans build the village for their imported settlers, who lived alongside the conquered Cumbrians under Norman rule? In this light, Lowther takes on national and international significance, as evidence of the process by which Normans and other knights conquered Europe's peripheries (Spain, eastern Europe, the Holy Land, and the 'Celtic fringe' of Britain), enabling Latin Christendom to double in size between the tenth and thirteenth centuries: the making of Europe.

Landscape

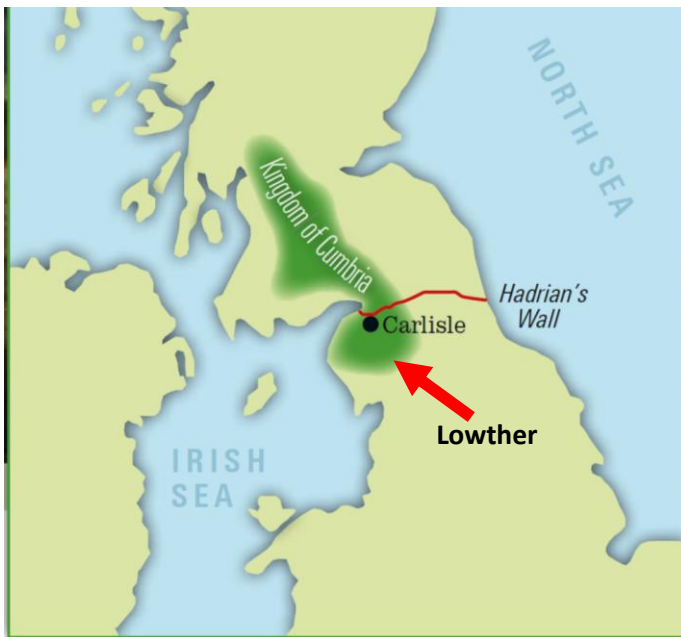
The landscape of Lowther's north park is distinctive and critical to its story. The early medieval church was sited at the end of a promontory overlooking the River Lowther. Its special status was marked by its monumental crosses, probably painted: the church site would have been visible for miles around. In 2026, the project will investigate Yanwath Fort. Sited to the north of the church over the river on a hilltop, the fort is scheduled as Iron Age but may be Viking Age (or have been repurposed in the Viking Age). If so, it was contemporary to the church in the 9th/10th century and part of the same landscape.

It seems the Normans levelled the early medieval church: a highly visible act of cultural conquest. The same promontory that reflected the spiritual importance of the early medieval church now gave the Norman castle its commanding position. The ringwork is sited on the edge of the promontory a little north of the church, overlooking the river. It was positioned to dominate the surrounding landscape. A panopticon, engineered to see and to be seen for miles, it would have been a glaring statement of Norman power.

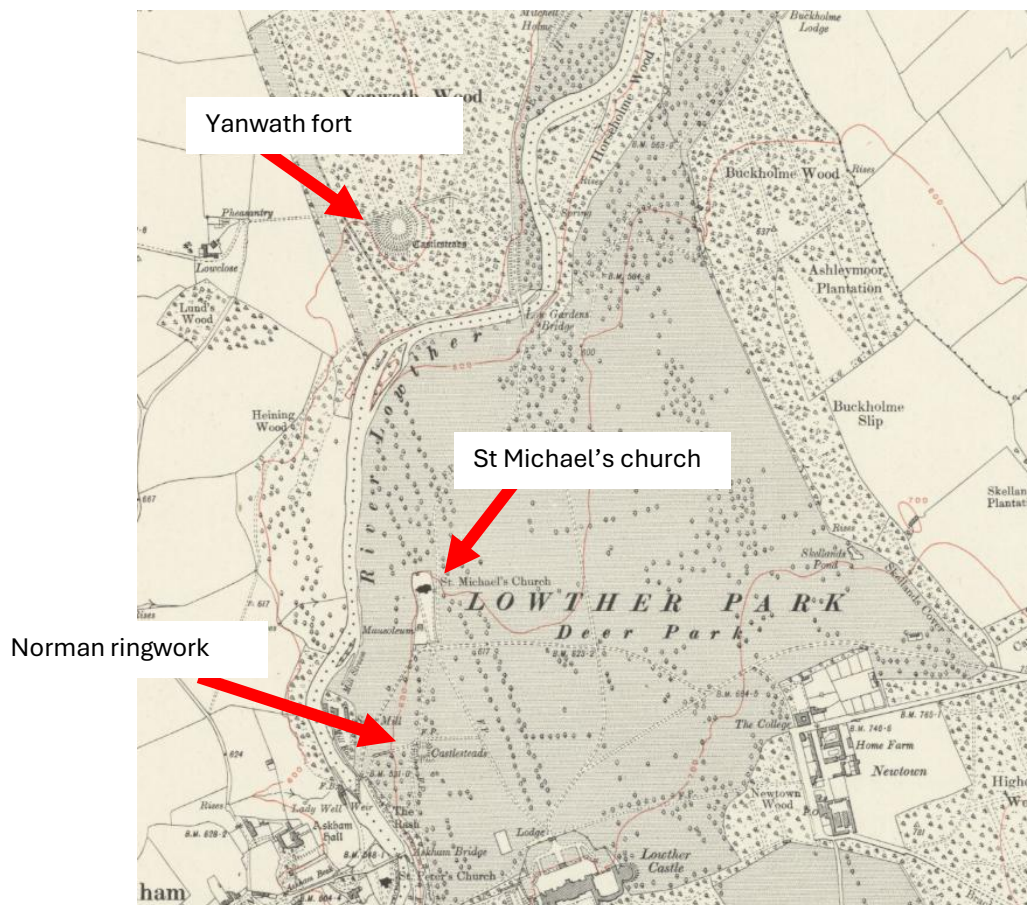
Together with the new Norman church, the ringwork castle and village made up the classic trinity of medieval settlement.

Appendix

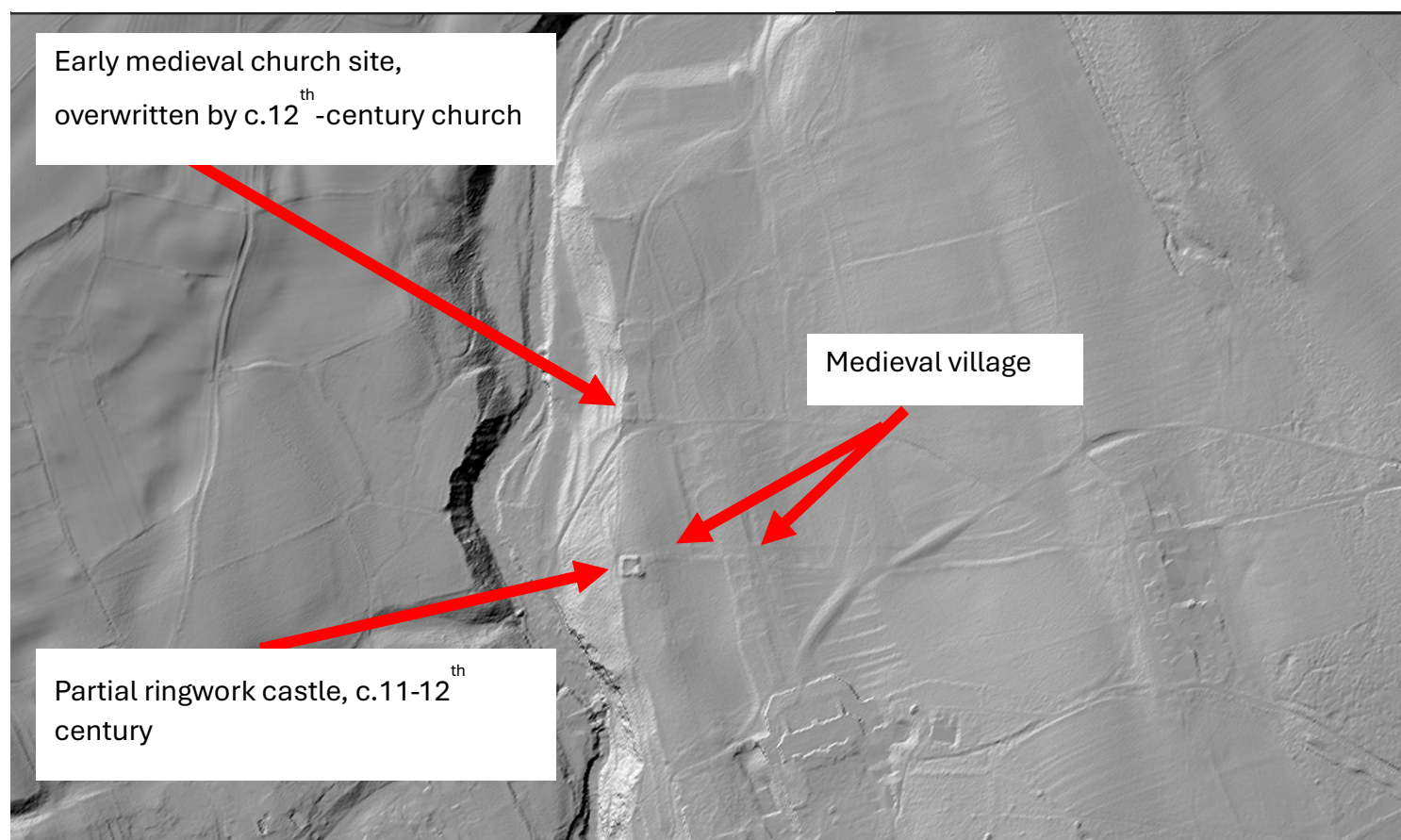
1. Cumbria in the 10th /11th centuries



2. Lowther's north park



3. LiDAR showing terrain of promontory and earthworks



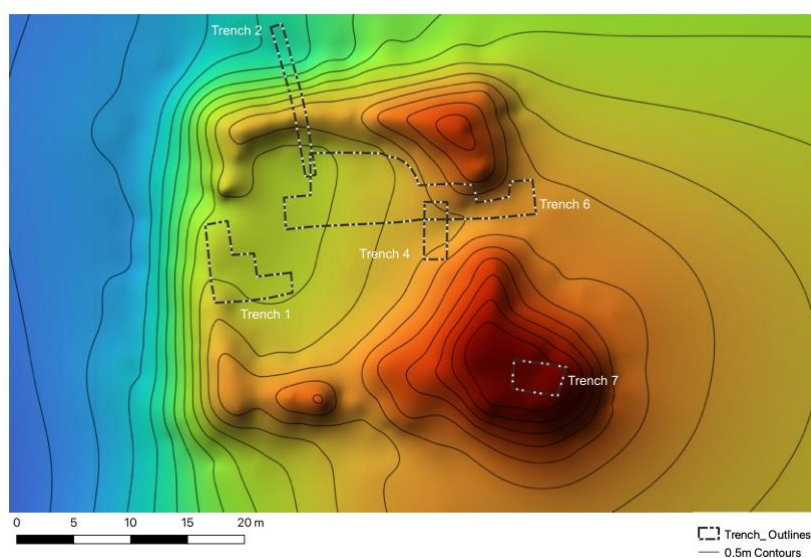
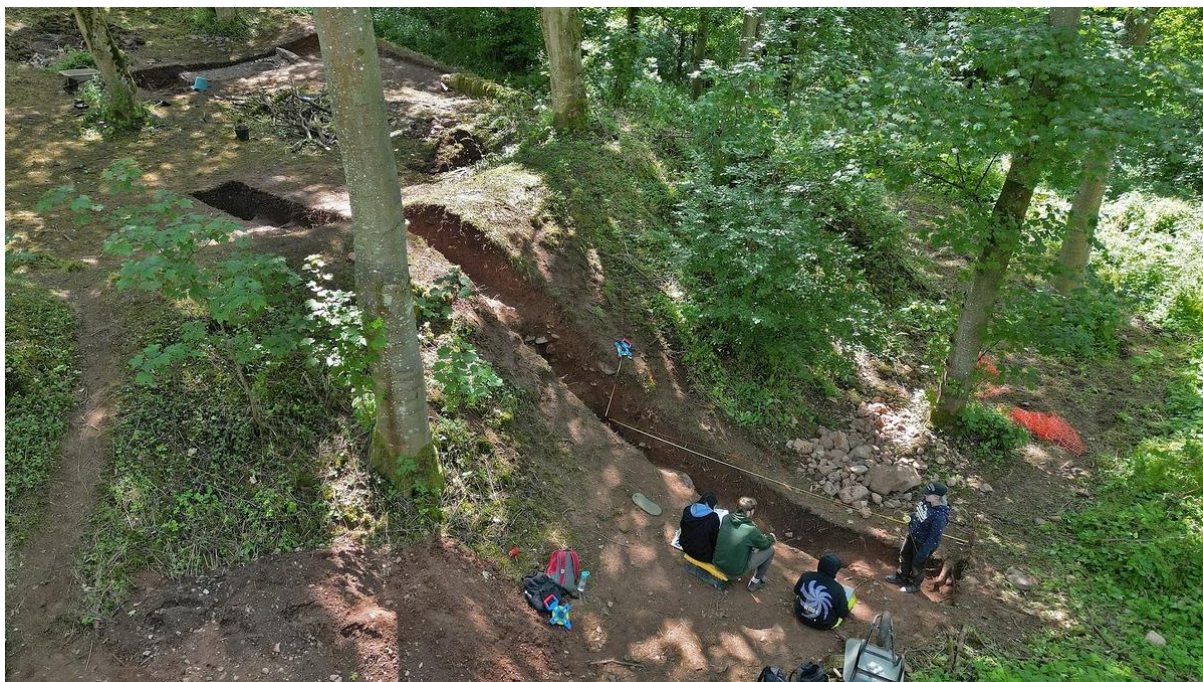
4. Earthwork survey of Norman ringwork and medieval village

5. Some of Lowther's early medieval sculpture. Clockwise from top left: Lowther 1 (shaft of monumental cross, 8th/9thC); Lowther 2 (shaft of monumental cross, 8th/9th C); Lowther 6 (hogback, 10th/11th C)



6. Recreation of early medieval monumental cross from TV series *Vikings*. The cross would have been painted.





7. Lowther's Norman ringwork.
Top to bottom: 2023
excavations, 3D mapping, and
reconstruction

