

BOOK REVIEW

Gary Bankhead, *Pilgrim Souvenirs, Devotional and other Objects of Faith: Late Medieval to Modern Finds from the River Wear, Durham*. Hardback; 225 pages; numerous photographs and line illustrations. ISBN 978-1-7391074-2-0. Durham: Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland Report 9 (in Association with the Museum of Archaeology, Durham University), 2025. Price: £40

Reviewer Dr Craig Barclay, Head of Museums, Galleries and Exhibitions, Durham University

In recent years Gary Bankhead has developed a national and international profile as a riverine archaeologist, appearing frequently in the pages of the press and making multiple television appearances. A graduate of Durham University, where he is Honorary Fellow in the Department of Archaeology, Gary's work beneath the waters of the River Wear has transformed our understanding of the river's connection to local communities, industries and trade from the Roman period onwards.¹



Like his previous monograph, *Textile Manufacture, Taxation and Trade in late- and Post-Medieval Durham City* (Durham, 2022), this new work aims to engage with both specialist and non-specialist audiences. The book is arranged into 5 chapters. The first of these serves an introductory function, providing the reader with an overview of the Durham River Wear Assemblage, comprising over 14,500 objects recovered by the author from the bed of the Wear between 2007 and 2013 and generously deposited with Durham University's Museum of Archaeology. The chapter also discusses the cult of St Cuthbert - which drew large numbers of medieval pilgrims to the city - and the broader practice of pilgrimage. The final section of the introductory chapter comprises a discussion by Dr Richard Kelleher (Fitzwilliam Museum) of 27 identifiable silver coins, ranging in date from the reigns of Edward I to George III, recovered from the bed of the Wear at Elvet. This essay, which also

touches upon the early modern tokens and jetons, draws upon Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS)² data, examining the coins (which include pieces from Ireland, Denmark and Venice) within the context of both regional and national recovery patterns, and raising the possibility that some, at least, of the coins were ritually deposited.

The second chapter is very much object-focused and concentrates upon late-medieval pilgrim souvenirs. These include three ampullae, two of which may be associated with Walsingham Priory, and a range of pilgrim badges, and crucifixes. Individual objects are discussed in depth, with particular attention being given to a late-medieval pewter pectoral cross, discovered by the author in 2011. This find very closely resembles in form the famed St Cuthbert's cross, even incorporating a representation of exquisite Anglo-Saxon cloisonné cells. The author seeks to address the challenge raised by the late Dame Rosemary Camp, who questioned how a late-medieval badge maker "could have known of the appearance of Saint Cuthbert's golden pectoral cross, given that the object was only discovered during Canon James Raine's investigation of Cuthbert's tomb in 1827".³ Possible connections with Scotland are explored, as is the likelihood that "at some point during the late medieval period Cuthbert's golden cross was probably displayed near his shrine in Durham Cathedral".⁴ Further faith-related objects are covered in the third chapter, which is entitled "Devotional and other religious objects". The material covered is wide ranging in scope and date, including crucifixes; post-medieval devotional medals; bells; spoon knops, mounts and pendants.

The fourth chapter is perhaps the most intriguing in the volume and focuses upon a collection of items relating to Arthur Ramsey, who served successively as Bishop of Durham, Archbishop of York and Archbishop of Canterbury between 1940 and 1974. Recovered by Gary Bankhead beneath from the river beneath Prebends Bridge, the cache included ceremonial souvenirs (engraved silver trowel and key); commemorative and award medals struck in gold, silver and bronze; crucifixes; a Corpus Christi figure by the sculptor Jean Lambert-Rucki; and a Christening spoon. At the time of their discovery (2007-09) the finds generated much speculation in the popular press as to why these items had ended up in the River Wear. The author effectively dismisses claims that the items were dropped into the river in the wake of a burglary at the retired Archbishop's Durham home. Instead, he makes an extremely convincing argument that the material was deliberately deposited in the Wear as a means of discretely and sensitively disposing of items - primarily gifts - that had been greatly valued by the increasingly frail Archbishop Ramsey and could not otherwise be offloaded without generating unwelcome attention and embarrassment.

The fifth and final chapter explores "other reasons for the disposal of objects in watery contexts". A range of individual items are highlighted, including rings, brooches, and a miner's check from Browney Colliery. Also discussed are two medals of First World War vintage awarded to William Alexander (Alick) Cochrane Newton, who served as a junior officer in the Royal Horse Artillery. Alick Cochrane and his new bride emigrated to Alberta at the end of the Great War, where he acted as the Duke of Windsor's adviser on his Canadian interests. Cochrane never returned to the UK and the question of how his hard-earned medals came to be at the bottom of the River Wear in central Durham represents a mystery that will perhaps never be solved.

Pilgrim Souvenirs, Devotional and other Objects of Faith is lavishly illustrated throughout, with colour photographs, line drawings, and Selene Photometric Stereo Scanner (SPSS)⁵ shaded renders. It is augmented by three appendices which present X-ray Fluorescence Spectrometry (XRF)⁶ analyses of Durham pit tokens; a catalogue of the 27 silver coins

recovered from the Wear at Elvet; and XRF analyses of a range of pilgrim souvenirs and devotional objects. A comprehensive bibliography concludes the work.

This volume, the publication of which was supported by The City of Durham Trust, makes an important contribution to our understanding of the archaeology of Durham and the role played by pilgrimage in the city's development. It successfully traverses the tricky middle-ground between academic and popular audiences and will make a valuable addition to the bookshelves of anyone with an interest in the history of the County or the role of Christianity in the North East.

¹ See: https://www.diveintodurham.uk/gary_bankhead.htm (Accessed 15/02/2026).

² The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) record archaeological objects found by members of the public in England and Wales. Established in 1997, it is jointly managed by the British Museum and Amgueddfa Cymr - Museum Wales. See <https://finds.org.uk/> (Accessed 16/02/2026).

³ Gary Bankhead, G. (2025), *Pilgrim Souvenirs, Devotional and other Objects of Faith: Late Medieval to Modern Finds from the River Wear, Durham*. (Durham; Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland Report 9), p.100.

⁴ Bankhead (2025), p.101.

⁵ SPSS is an imaging technique used to extract extremely detailed visual information relating to the surface of an object.

⁶ XRF is a non-destructive analytical technique used to determine the composition of materials.