

## Discovering Lorton's Early History by Derek Denman

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### Discovering Lorton's Early History

#### About This Walk

This walk covers both High and Low Lorton villages, in Cumbria, intending to provide a history of Lorton from the earliest records in the twelfth century up to the end of the seventeenth century.

The distance is about five kilometres. The walk follows good public paths, though there can be mud on the field paths after rain. Much of the route is on the public highway, and so please take great care of the traffic, ensuring that you can be seen. High Lorton has a shop and there are refreshments and facilities at the Wheat Sheaf in Low Lorton.

The route is shown on the map on the centre pages, which uses the Ordnance Survey map of 1863. It covers most of Lorton, and shows how land use and ownership developed.

#### Lorton's Origins

In this walk, Lorton means Lorton Civil Parish, the area which was formerly the Township of Lorton, in Cumberland. The western boundary is the old course of the River Cocker, over which are Whinfell and Thackthwaite. To the North is Embleton, and to the South is Brackenthwaite. To the East are Braithwaite and Thornthwaite, now parts of Above Derwent Civil Parish.

The two rows of farmsteads at Low and High Lorton existed in the mid-twelfth century, and we have no earlier records. The 'ton' name suggests an Anglian settlement from the seventh or eighth centuries. The 'Lor' element is thought to be Old Norse, suggesting a Norse-Irish population from the tenth century. Possibly the two rows at Low Lorton, on higher ground at the crossing of the Cocker, and at High Lorton, situated along the break of slope of Kirk Fell, were

created at different times by different groups.

Before Norman rule, most of future Cumberland was in the mid-British territory of Strathclyde, or medieval Cumbria, which embraced the Solway. In 1066 this territory retained Scottish control, until William Rufus took Carlisle in 1092. With the first Norman baronies, Lorton was in Coupland and not Allerdale, the boundary being the Derwent.

By about 1120 the land between the Cocker and the Derwent, including Lorton, had been granted to the Lord of Allerdale, as the forest manor of Derwentfells. The inhabitants had exchanged a Norman lord at Egremont,

Lorton's 1000 year old yew tree



for a native lord, at Papcastle, which might indicate a strong native culture.

Norman rule of Lorton lasted from 1092 until 1136. So that Lorton was ruled neither by the Conqueror, nor by the last Norman king, the usurper Stephen. After the death of Henry I in 1135, David I of Scotland took the northern counties in campaigns from 1136 to 1138, ostensibly supporting Matilda in the English civil war. Scottish rule lasted until 1157.

### The first records of Lorton

Circa 1138 the existing settlement of High Lorton, with the mill, was given as a freehold manor to the Priory Church of Carlisle. The grantor, Ranulph de Lindesay, was a knight in the service of David I. Ranulph had married the sister of the Lord of Allerdale and was granted several manors. He also gave the chapel at Loweswater to St Bees Priory. Perhaps these grants, our first historical records, were made to atone for the notorious misdeeds in the 1136-8 campaign, when Lorton men probably fought for David.

Low Lorton was also manorialised, possibly in the late twelfth century, but all we know is that by 1230 Low Lorton was held as a freehold estate by Thomas Mariscal. The principal boundary between the two manors was Church Lane, formerly Crossgates Lane.

### The Poundfold (1)

Start in the poundfold by Whitbeck, next to the famous Lorton yew tree. The poundfold, or pinfold, was the place where stray stock was impounded or pinned, until the owners reclaimed them and paid a fine.

The yew tree is older than it looks. Storms have greatly reduced its size and spread. The girth of Lorton's oldest living female inhabitant, measured in the nineteenth century, suggests an age around 1200 years, possibly as old as High Lorton. Perhaps the yew was planted or retained at a meeting place by the first Norse-Irish settlers? The old highway from Cockermouth to Keswick, a route with Roman origins, came over this bridge

and through Scales. The Whinlatter road and New Bridge date from the 1760s.

Opposite the poundfold entrance is the start of the leat which ran south to Lorton High Mill. To the East is Boonbeck Farm. 'Boon' in this village means 'above', the only High Lorton farm above Whit Beck. Boonbeck was held by the Stubbs family for centuries.

Cross the bridge and take the road to High Mill, noting that all the land to the right as far as the mill was the open arable land belonging to High Lorton, while most land on the left, over Whit Beck, belonged to the manor of Derwentfells.

### Lorton High Mill (2)

This was Lorton's medieval corn mill, recorded circa 1138. The Low Lorton mill is over the Cocker in Whinfell. High Mill operated, with some gaps, until the 1880s. The present mill was built in 1801 and has been recently restored with its wheel, but no water.

The corn mill would grind mainly oats and some barley. The grain belonged to the peasant farmers, and they would need to employ the mill about every three weeks to grind their flour, before drying kilns were in use.

The mill was also mentioned in 1247. The Honour of Cockermouth had earlier been divided between daughters as co-heirs, including the private forest of Derwentfells. Sharing of the hunting in the forest by two lords was not harmonious, and the forest ownership was divided. The mill at Lorton, belonging to the Prior of Carlisle, was the start of the division going up Whitbeck. Alan de Multon, who held the northern part of Derwentfells, also held the superior lordship of Lorton.

The present road continues to Swinside, (3) the pig headland. This was a detached part of Buttermere until 1886, when it was transferred to Lorton. Swinside's inclusion in the Buttermere rents probably dates Swinside to between 1247 and the re-unification of Derwentfells in 1323.

### Road to Brackenthwaite

The road from High Lorton to the mill was the old Highway to Brackenthwaite, recorded in 1649. For a shorter walk take the footpath alongside Whit Beck but to see this continued medieval highway, take the pleasant footpath (4) just past the mill. Shortly after starting you can catch a glimpse of the breast-shot waterwheel on the south side of the mill.

Then experience the narrowness of this ancient road, with its old wall remains where it crosses Ellerbeck (5) (Alder Beck). Alders were coppiced here for clog making and other uses. The road now turns right to join the Hopebeck road directly (6), but the old highway continued through the gate as a footpath. In the nineteenth century Lorton township decided that this old road from the mill should no longer be maintained as a highway.

### High Whitbeck Bridge

Turn right at Hopebeck road and go on to High Whitbeck Bridge (7). In the mid-nineteenth century this was still an occupation road for farming, rather than a highway. This boundary between High and Low Lorton stretches straight as far as Cass How (8). It has been a landscape feature since the mid-twelfth century.

This bridge marks the entry into the medieval cultivated lands of Low Lorton, to the west of the road. The lands to the south of Whitbeck and as far as Hope Beck, were used as common grazing until enclosed and cultivated by Lorton tenants from 1473. New House Farm was created after that time. Note the old course of Whit Beck to the West, and an ancient, pollarded ash-tree.

### Crossgates (9)

At Crossgates the continued boundary road becomes Church

Lane, but was called Crossgates Lane in 1649.

The road from Low to High Lorton was the Highway to the Common in 1649, for people from Low Lorton and their stock. Low Lorton used the common beyond Scales (10), formerly the medieval huts used for milking and stock management

When the medieval village had open fields there would be no walled road. This road location, which cuts across the old furrows, would date from, say, the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. There were no buildings on this road before the nineteenth century. The gates and the large crossing area would be for the marshalling of stock.

Turn left at Crossgates and go past Oak Lodge, built in 1886, to the next junction, Lorton Cross (11). Continue down what was Burtrees (elder trees) Road to the bridge (12).

### Bridge over the Cocker

The centre of the bridge is the boundary between Lorton and Whinfell. Over the bridge in on the left is Whinfell's corn mill, better known as Lorton Low Mill. By the sixteenth century this mill was half owned by the Winders of Lorton Hall, and was later fully part of that estate.

The two-arched bridge was washed away in 2009, and the new single span bridge retains the old sandstone bridge abutments. William Gill held Bridgend in 1517, which implies an early bridge.

### Lorton Hall from the road, 1803





Landlady of the Pack Horse, circa 1880

Bridgend farm (13) was on the south side into the twentieth century, when it was the home farm of the Lorton Hall estate. It is now a small hamlet. The name Bridgend identifies the farm at the end of the town by the bridge, which suggests that Low Lorton row village ended here. See the plan on page 5.

Return to Lorton Cross (11), noting that the wall on the left, built about 1890, enclosed Lorton Hall (14) and its grounds, from the bridge to the Wheat Sheaf.

#### Lorton Cross

This was once a populated industrious area with buildings on both sides of the Low Road. Lorton Cross is known from the seventeenth century, and it may relate to the crossroads here. The Low Road, going up the valley from here, was probably a highway after the enclosure of Lorton Head in 1473, though old field names suggest that it was once a dyke, above the water meadows.

The large wall now surrounds Lorton Hall, but that corner with the summer house was once Cross Nook, a group of

ancient dwellings which were cleared away around 1890. In the eighteenth century a house and smith's shop stood to the east of Cross Nook in Pippin Mould, and the area by the notice board was kennels in 1803, and later a joiner's shop.

#### The third shares of Low Lorton

In 1230 Thomas Mariscal held the 'vill of Loreton', i.e. Low Lorton, as a freehold manor under the superior lordship of Alan de Multon. This manor is shown yellow on the centre map. The tenants were feudal tenants of Thomas Mariscal, and they did not own their freeholds. By 1305 that freehold manor had been divided in three, probably among co-heirs. The division of Low Lorton into three smaller manors is shown approximately on page 5.

One of the thirds included Bridgend farm plus the old farmsteads at Lorton Cross, and then stretched north from here until the farmstead before the current gate to Lorton Hall Tower. The manorial tenants of this third were enfranchised by buying their freeholds in the 1590s, principally the Pearsons at Bridgend.

The middle third then ran up to the road or path to the church at Kirkgate End. The last third ran on to Croft Farm.

#### The Winder family and Lorton Hall (14)

The tower of Lorton Hall pretends to have protected from Scottish incursions, but it was a Victorian folly added in about 1840, then without windows. There is no evidence of a medieval hall.

This middle third, see page 5, came into the hands of Margaret de Wyndere by 1397. The Winder family held that freehold estate for three hundred years, until John Winder sold in 1699. Probably there were six or more medieval farm tenements, with feudal tenants, but by the early sixteenth century the Winder family became resident and gradually took the farms into their own hands. They had built the hall range by the 1530s. This is now Winder Hall and is dated 1663, but it retains features of an earlier single-storey hall.

The name Lorton Hall was first recorded in 1702. Through the eighteenth

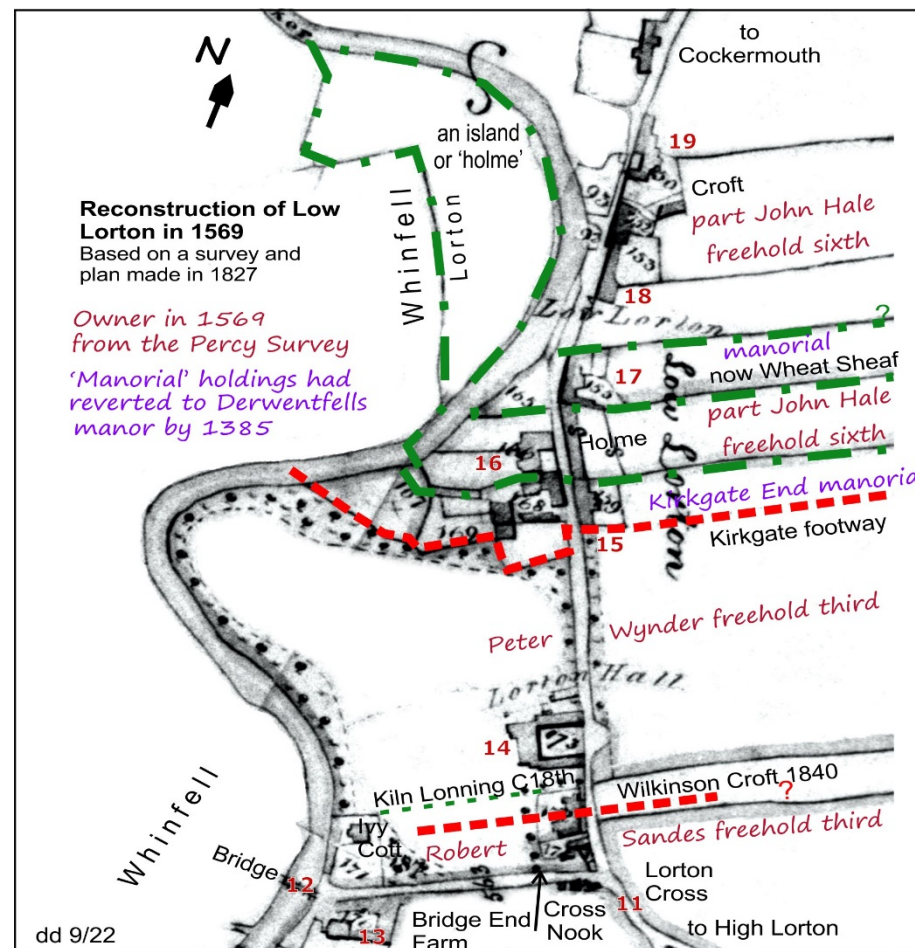
century it was owned by various minor gentry. The wider estate was sold off, but in 1800 Lorton Hall, its estate, the Packhorse, and the Low Mill, were acquired by Joshua Lucock of Cocker mouth.

Joshua Lucock changed his name to Bragg in 1805 to inherit his uncle's Liverpool estate. He purchased the manor of Loweswater and built up his local estate. He died in 1809 and the four eldest children became lunatics. George, the youngest son, took charge after his mother, Rebecca, died. In the 1840s George built the western half as the new front, built the folly tower, and created

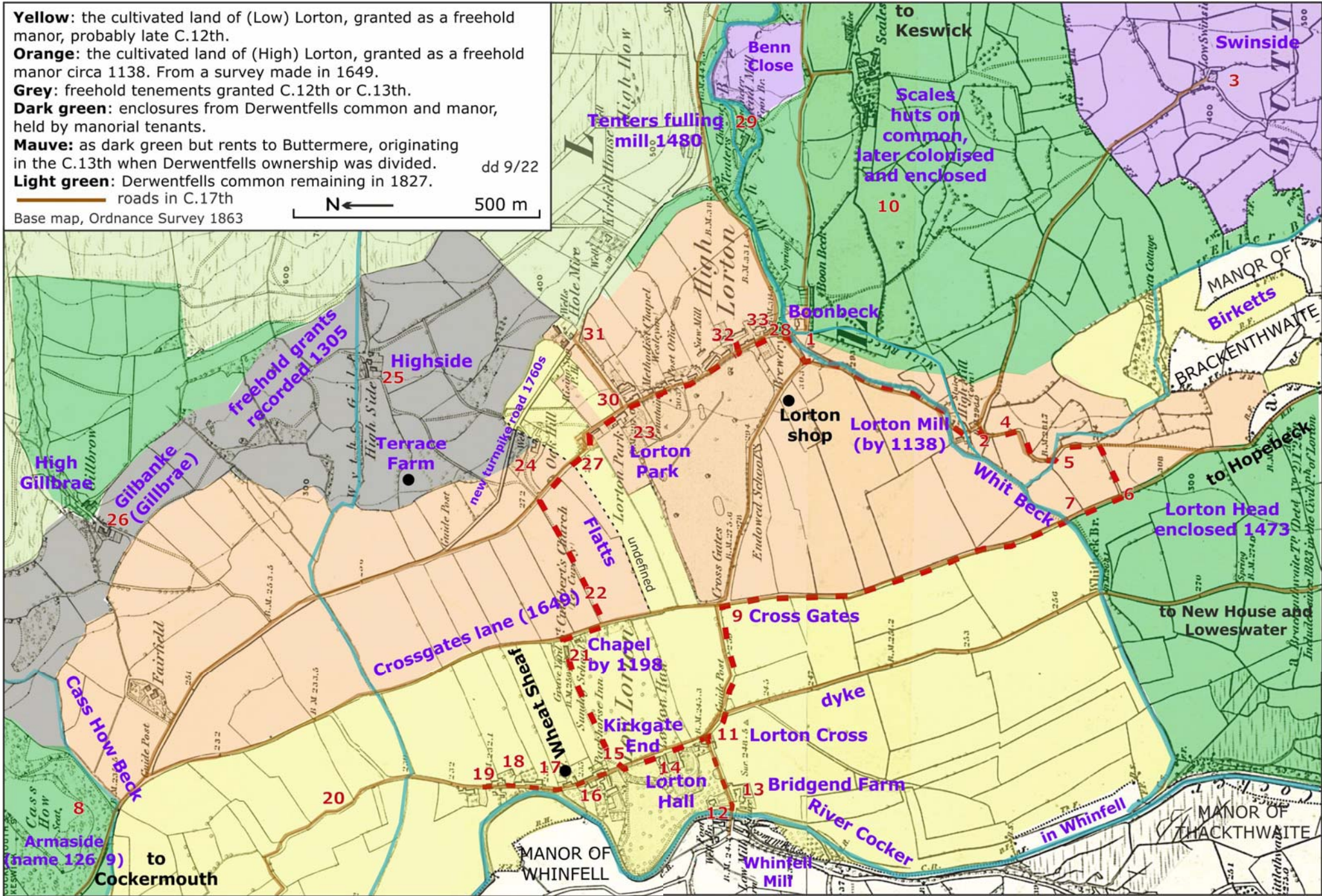
the carriage drive. He was killed in 1847 and his twin sister Elizabeth and her husband Robert Bridge returned from Dorset. They were dead by 1857, leaving lunatic siblings Sarah and John here until their deaths in 1875. In 1885 the Dixons of Rheda purchased the estate, and Anthony Dixon rebuilt the hall, essentially as seen today.

#### At Kirkgate (15)

Go north along the road as far as the footpath to the Church, the kirk gate, noting that there were once buildings on both sides of the road but those to the East were cleared by the Winders. The



**Yellow:** the cultivated land of (Low) Lorton, granted as a freehold manor, probably late C.12th.  
**Orange:** the cultivated land of (High) Lorton, granted as a freehold manor circa 1138. From a survey made in 1649.  
**Grey:** freehold tenements granted C.12th or C.13th.  
**Dark green:** enclosures from Derwentfells common and manor, held by manorial tenants.  
**Mauve:** as dark green but rents to Buttermere, originating in the C.13th when Derwentfells ownership was divided. dd 9/22  
**Light green:** Derwentfells common remaining in 1827.  
 ——— roads in C.17th  
 Base map, Ordnance Survey 1863



footpath to the church has been here for at least 800 years, and also marks the start of the last third of Low Lorton.

This last third is rather more varied than the others because before 1385 it had been split into two sixths, one of which had reverted, or escheated, to the lord of Derwentfells, Maud de Lucy. Also, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the last freehold sixth was enfranchised to the manorial tenants. of the individual farms, who became freeholders. This also happened in the first third. So that Low Lorton's history is rather complicated with a mix of ownerships, while High Lorton tenants were generally manorial until into the twentieth century.

#### **Kirkgate End Farms**

In both High and Low Lorton each medieval farmstead had two rows of buildings, and in Low Lorton the highway developed between the two rows. In 1578 this first farmstead of the last third was called Kirkgate End, meaning the end of town at the road to the Kirk or Church. The farm had been split in two, with the farmsteads either side of the road being owned by different members of the Peile family. The Kirkgate End farms were manorial tenancies in Derwentfells.

The Kirkgate End farmstead on this east side was the first to change because it was also Lorton's inn, providing stabling and probably accommodation for the Church. The inscription over the door of Packhorse Cottage follows the normal convention. The upper initial is the family name, the husband's first name to the left and the wife to the right. B, T&M, 1734, marks the building of that inn by Thomas and Mary Barnes, nee Peile. They became Peile-Barnes and in 1766 Thomas Peile-Barnes of the Pack Horse was prosperous enough to purchase Lorton Hall and to combine the estates. The Pack Horse closed in the 1920s.

The other Kirkgate End farmstead, on the west side of the road, remained as a farm for much longer. That farm was purchased from the Fletcher family by Joshua Lucock Bragg of Lorton Hall in

1806. It became the Kirkstile or Churchstile farm as part of the Lorton Hall estate, being finally cleared away by the Dixons in the 1890s and replaced by their gatehouse, now Lorton Hall Lodge.

#### **Holme Farm (16)**

The next farmstead on the west, known as the Holme, was probably the most important medieval farm in Low Lorton. It was extensively rebuilt in the 'great rebuilding' of the seventeenth century and has not been changed much since. The name Holme comes from the Old Norse for island, and in this case probably comes from a close of land held between the old and new courses of the River Cocker, which is now over the river but still in Lorton. This farm was not split into two, and it retained property on both sides of the road into the nineteenth century.

In 1649 this whole farm, owned by the Pearsons, had extensive freehold land within the boundary of the manor of High Lorton, an ownership with origins which would logically pre-date the creation of that manor in about 1138.

#### **The Wheat Sheaf (17)**

The next old farmstead, now the Wheat Sheaf, was a manorial tenancy in Derwentfells, making up with Kirkgate End that sixth of the manor which had escheated by 1305. It was converted into a Jennings pub before 1847. Wheat was not grown here.

#### **Beckside (18)**

The two properties now called Beckside and Lowstead are the remains of a substantial farmstead, owned by Thomas Williamson in 1649. The inscription W, M&A 1679 probably records his son Mark and his wife 'A'. The Williamsons were freeholders by 1578.

#### **Croft Farm (19)**

This last freehold farm in the row, now called Croft, became a Pearson property, as did Holme Farm and Bridgend.

In the plant growth by the river, in front of the converted nineteenth century

smithy, there were the remains of a jig for putting steel bands on cartwheels. Lime Tree Cottage was the premises of J W Hardisty, joiner and cartwright, in the early twentieth century. These ancient village trades combined to make many products, and co-location helped.

Croft was the last known farm in the row village. The road (20) continues past the modern sewage works to Great Close and through the fields providing the shared meadow land of Low Lorton.

Return to Packhorse Cottage and the footpath to the Church.

#### **St Cuthbert's (21)**

Though the manor of High Lorton was a monastic holding, the Priory Church of Carlisle had no religious responsibilities here. Lorton had a chaplain, Michael, by 1198, which implies a chapel at Lorton, probably on this site to serve both villages. The present building was built on the existing footings in 1807-9.

St Cuthbert's has been the parish church of Lorton since 1883. Previously Lorton was a chapelry within the parish of Brigham, which was not in the diocese of Carlisle until 1856. Brigham was in the medieval archdeaconry of Richmond in the diocese of York, and from 1541 in the new diocese of Chester.

The parish of Brigham included chapels at Cockermouth and Embleton. That parish was given to the collegiate church of Staindrop in 1439, which meant that they owned the tithes and appointed the vicar. Lorton Chapel was therefore monastic property until the reformation, when the rights were sold to private owners.

Lorton's parochial chapelry also included Wythop, Brackethwaite, Buttermere, and half of Whinfell. Lorton's graveyard served those places as far back as we know, and the parish registers start in 1538. From Wythop there was a corpse road over the fells, which probably came down through Highside.

Some time spent in the churchyard will provide a connection with the people who lived here, but do not ponder over the imaginary Winder Vault. As principal



**The old chapel in 1803**

yeomen in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, the Winders would be buried in the floor of the chapel.

Lorton township had few Quakers. They settled as a tight community west of the River Cocker. Whinfell, half in Lorton chapelry, had many Quakers. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the changing nature of High Lorton supported the growth of Methodism.

#### **Footpath to High Lorton (22)**

Leave the graveyard and turn right into Church Lane, which again is the boundary between Low and High Lorton, called Crossgates Lane in 1649. Just past the former Sunday School, a gate affords the best view of the old front of Lorton Hall, dated 1663. Turn left on the footpath from the Church to High Lorton, passing through the former open-arable land of the medieval High Lorton village. The oats from this land sustained the village and its oxen, and later horses. However, in the nineteenth century, as the village turned to rearing stock and importing wheat, all this land to the south was gradually purchased to create Lorton Park (23).

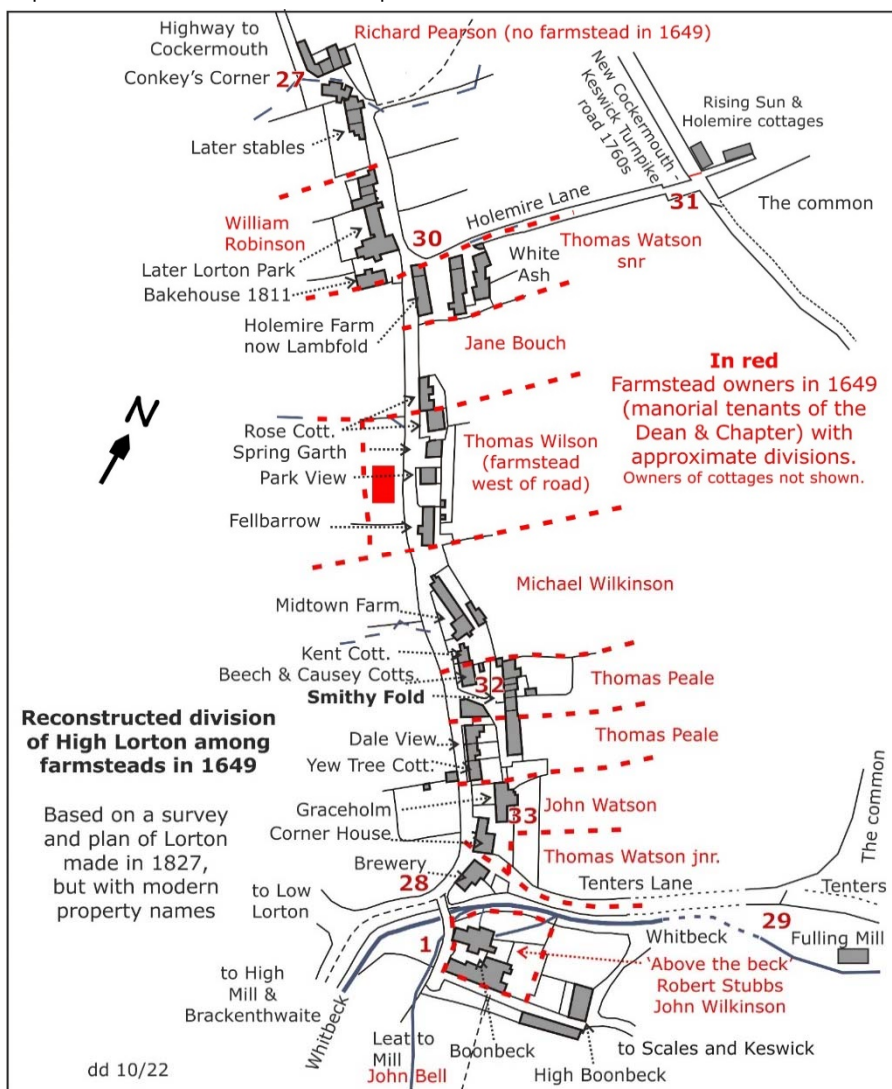
Exiting the footpath to Seggs Lane, Oak Hill (24) opposite was another gentry mansion of the nineteenth century, built by the curate William Armitstead. The

footpath to its north leads from the Church to Highside (25), and then over the fells to Embleton and Wythop. Highside and Gillbrow (26), formerly Gillbank, were freehold estates, like Low Lorton, which existed in 1305, and probably in 1230. Terrace Farm is the modern farmstead.

The three mansions of Lorton Park, Oak Hill, and Fairfield were created by a group of Embleton/Whitehaven/Liverpool

commercial families, who provided the social leadership of Lorton from the mid nineteenth century, when the Lucock-Braggs of Lorton Hall had failed. Kirkfell House is a villa with a view.

Further north, and not shown on the centre map, is the hamlet of Armaside which developed as manorial tenancies from the Derwentfells forest or common, certainly before 1369.



The old barns fronted the highway

The walk turns right along Seggs Lane to reach the old row village at the double bend called Conkey's Corner (27).

#### Development of High Lorton

While Low Lorton remained agricultural and residential, High Lorton changed radically after the seventeenth century, which is the end of the period of this walk. The new Whinlatter Road, as part of the 1760s Turnpike connecting Cockermouth and Keswick, stimulated the development of trade and industry in High Lorton, with changes in population and buildings.

There were three major developments, the Jennings brewery (28) from the 1820s, the flax threadmill (29) from the 1830s, and the acquisition of the ancient arable land for Lorton Park.

This walk will focus on the underlying structure of the medieval row village. Extensive information on modern High Lorton and its people can be found on the 'features' and 'sources' pages of the Society's website.

#### High Lorton in 1649

We are fortunate to have a written plan of the manor of High Lorton, with no map, from a parliamentary survey of 1649. The plan on page 10 reconstructs the plots of the main farmsteads from that survey, based on a plan of buildings in 1827, with current property names. The centre map shows the manor lands in orange.

#### At Conkey's Corner (27)

Conkey's Corner has a distinctive terrace of three cottages, one of which housed the Conkey family between the wars, Bill Conkey being a champion runner in the 1930s. The three cottages were converted by the owners of Lorton Park of a farmstead built around 1700 by the Pearsons of Low Lorton. This farmstead appears to be on the site of a lost

medieval farmstead. This was the end of the row village which stretched to Boonbeck Farm. The double bend here is probably the consequence of a watercourse.

#### Walking along High Lorton Street

While most old farm buildings were on the East, the Lorton Park mansion, built in the late 1820s, incorporates part of a 1649 farmstead on the west of the road, in what were the medieval open fields.

Reaching the junction with Holemire Lane (30), this now goes up to meet the Whinlatter Road (31), and the Rising Sun, a former coaching inn. Before 1760 Holemire was a muddy lonning to access the common, and White Ash farm. This farmstead and Lambfold, are the result of an unusual division of a farmstead between heirs, rather than sharing.

Continuing along High Lorton Street, each of these farmsteads on the left generally had a farmhouse, barns, byers, a garth, and an orchard. Above that was a kitchen garden called boonhouse, meaning above the house. Above that was an 'ing', or meadow, going up to a ring fence where the common started.

As in Low Lorton, each farmstead had two rows of buildings, but here the highway developed on the headland to the west of the buildings rather than through the folds between the rows of buildings. The current roadside dwellings have mostly been developed from the backs and barns of the old farmsteads.

The join between Kent Cottage and Causey Cottage marks one end of two farmsteads owned Thomas Peale in 1649. The other end is after Yew Tree Cottage. These two farmsteads were redeveloped from the late seventeenth century, for housing and village trades. Enter Smithy Fold (32) to see how the two rows of buildings of each farmstead were converted into the village centre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including blacksmith, joiner/cartwright, and public house.



**Midtown faces away from the highway**

Continuing along High Lorton Street, Graceholme (33) now shows the front of an old farmhouse, its remaining barn fronting the road. This barn was once longer and higher. It was the last building before the steep Tenters Lane. another road to the common.

#### **Jennings Brewery (28)**

Part of Graceholm's barn was sold in 1809 to the maltster, William Jennings for his premises, which is now Corner House. His son, John Jennings, was the first brewer of Lorton Ale, establishing the works to the south of Tenters Lane before 1827, and the malthouse, or Yew Tree Hall, sometime later. Brewing moved to Cockermouth in the 1870s, until 2022.

#### **Tenters Fulling Mill (29)**

Lorton had a new fulling mill in 1480, upstream on Whit Beck. The mill was used to cleanse and to felt woollen cloth, from which outer garments were made. The tenters were the frames on which the finished cloth was stretched out to dry, and these were on the fell at the top of Tenters Lane, which also gave access to the mill.

By 1835 the fulling mill had closed and the site and water-power was re-used for a large flax thread-mill. The industrial revolution had arrived in High Lorton.

#### **The Poundfold (1)**

Crossing the bridge, on the old highway to Keswick, brings the walk to the end of the row village at Boonbeck and back to the Yew Tree in the poundfold.

This has long been a meeting place in High Lorton, and the tree was recorded in this period, well before Wordsworth and Coleridge visited in 1799. In the Commonwealth period, when the bishops lost their control of the Church, the Quaker preacher George Fox was here. In 1653, the tree was much more capacious. 'When I came, I found James Lancaster speaking under a yew tree; which was so full of people that I feared they would break it down.' The old tree and the old village are still here.

#### **Sources and reading**

*A Cumberland valley: a history of the parish of Lorton*, by Ron George, 2003

More information is available on the website of the Lorton & Derwent Fells LHS: [www.derwentfells.com](http://www.derwentfells.com).

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