

Lorton & Derwent Fells Local History Society

Brackenthwaite Buttermere Embleton Loweswater Mockerkin Mosser Pardshaw Whinfell Wythop

www.derwentfells.com

Low Lorton Village Walk – August 2013

These two walks cover the history of the properties and people of villages of Low & High Lorton from the C12th (1101-1200). The text accompanies an annotated map based on the first Ordnance Survey of 1863.

The walks are on good public paths, though there can be mud on the Low Lorton path to the north after rain. Much of the route is directly on the public highway, unavoidably, and so please take great care of the traffic, ensure you can be seen and keep a look out for vehicles. The Stations for gathering and observation have been chosen to minimise the risk, but risk remains.

Lorton origins

When we speak of Lorton we usually mean the township of the Lorton, the civil area of administration which became the civil parish in the C19th. One boundary was the Cocker, over which was Whinfell. To the north was Embleton, starting at Shatton, to the south Brackenthwaite starting just after New House Farm. And there was a detached part of Buttermere at Swinside. The township of Lorton has contained two separate rows of farmsteads at Low and High Lorton since the twelfth century, and we do not know of any earlier form. Low Lorton has the feel of being the earlier settlement, on higher ground near a crossing of the Cocker, and the 'ton' name suggests an Anglian settlement. High Lorton, situated along the break of slope of Kirk Fell, has more of the feel of a Norse-Irish settlement, which might date from the tenth century. By 1158 the existing settlement of High Lorton was given as a freehold manor to the friars of the Priory Church of Carlisle. Low Lorton was also manorialised, possibly before High Lorton, but we know only that by 1230 the freehold manor of the Vill of Loreton was held, or owned, by Thomas Mariscal. The boundary between the lands belonging to the two settlements was, and still is, Church Lane, formerly Crossgates Lane. Lorton had a chaplain, Michael, by 1198, and presumably a chapel at Lorton within the parish of Brigham.

After the manorialisation of Low and High Lorton other farmsteads were created from the common, such as Highside, Armaside, Gillbrow and Scales. These remained in the forest manor of Derwentfells, becoming part of the Honour of Cockermouth when that castle was built and the town was created, early in the thirteenth century.

Low Lorton Village Walk

Station 1 at St Cuthbert's churchyard.

St Cuthbert's has been the parish church of Lorton since 1883, but previously it was a chapelry in the parish of Brigham, which included Cockermouth, and was a curacy. The appointment of the vicar of Brigham and tithes of Lorton were granted to the collegiate church of Staindrop in 1439, and were with the Lowthers in the C19th. Lorton parochial Chapelry included Brackenthwaite, Buttermere and Wythop, the last two having chapels of ease. Although Lorton township boundary was the River Cocker, the people of this settlements of Whinfell, other than the numerous Quakers, have always used St Cuthbert's and are included in the ecclesiastical parish. There is no evidence to suggest that the chapel of St Cuthbert, now the church of Lorton Parish, was not always in this convenient but isolated place. The present building was rebuilt on the existing footings from 1807-9. The new addition at that time was the tower, which replaced and open bell-case for two bells. The squire, Joshua Lucock Bragg of Lorton Hall, had agreed to build a tower three yards square, but it looked like a chimney and he stopped the work. In 1809, with Bragg on his death bed, the present tower was completed by public subscription – though Bragg's trustees later paid £21.

The registers of St Cuthbert's go back to 1538, to the start of the requirement to keep registers, though there are many gaps before the C18th. The old churchyard was rounded and was extended twice. We do not know when burials started here, but it could be very early. Buttermere people are still buried here, and Wythop people were also until the fashionable St Margaret's was built in 1865. At the end of the walk, consider some of the inhabitants who rest here.

The vicarage was built around 1892 for the first vicar, William Sampson Davies. It was used until 1962, when the incumbent moved into Lorton Hall, and was sold in 1985.

Station 2 the Sunday School

The Sunday School to the south was donated by Elizabeth Bridge (nee Bragg) of Lorton Hall to commemorate her husband, and extended twice. Previously the Sunday School was held in the chapel, and its rules from 1813 give a picture of a particularly austere and disciplined Sunday regime for the village children. Reluctantly the parochial church council sold it in 1980 to raise money to maintain the church (a familiar pattern of events) and then found that the Church Commissioners claimed the proceeds,

but generously allowed the parish to have the interest. Notice the footpath going to High Lorton, but also that it continues up by Highside and the across the fells to Embleton and Wythop. This was probably the route by which coffins were brought from Wythop, if not by road.

Continue along Church Lane which is an ancient occupation road called Crossgates Lane, originally just a ploughing headland where the oxen were turned. Go past Crossgates and continue as far as Whitbeck Bridge.

Station 3 Whitbeck Bridge.

As we have walked along the boundary, all the land to the right or west has been the open arable fields, for oats and barley, belonging to the village of Low Lorton. High Lorton manor's land was to the east. The medieval open fields stopped at Whitbeck and from here was common. The footpaths here alongside Whitbeck, in both directions, marks the end of the open fields. Some open-field names are given on the map.

We know that the common from here, up to the boundary with Brackenthwaite, was enclosed by the inhabitants of Low Lorton in 1473 and called Lorton Heads. This road, from a little further south, was the main highway up the valley, through Hopebeck, and we should probably see the Low Road as developing to serve Lorton Heads, and New House Farm on that road probably developed from buildings to service that new enclosed land.

Looking in the close to the south west of the bridge we can still see the old line of Whitbeck before it was canalised. The hollow pollarded ash tree by the roadside may be the oldest tree in Low Lorton, several hundreds of years old.

Return to Crossgates. (It would be better to take the footpath to the Low Road and turn right to Lorton Cross, but the Low Road is not safe for pedestrians.)

Station 4, Crossgates

This an old name for this location and must relate to the crossing between High and Low Lorton. The inhabitants of Low Lorton used the common beyond Scales, and the farmsteads at Scales probably developed from the huts they built there. The road to it was the Highway to the Common (for people and stock from Low Lorton) in 1649. The gates and large crossing area were for the marshalling of stock. Note Broomlands on the south-east corner, built in 1874 by Moffat Towers on a piece of land called Broom, purchased in 1870. Also notice the daughter of the Lorton yew tree, planted in 2004. Turn left at Crossgates and carry on past the Oak Lodge, built in 1886 by the Dixons of Lorton Hall, to the next junction which was Lorton Cross.

Station 5 Lorton Cross

This was once a populated industrious area and marked the end of a row of farmsteads with buildings on both sides of the low road. The origin of the name Lorton Cross is unknown, but the simple explanation is the crossing of the Cocker, or simply of roads, as in Crosthwaite. The large wall now surrounds Lorton Hall, but on that corner was Cross Nook a group of buildings which were cleared away by the Dixons of Lorton Hall around 1890. In the C18th a house and smithy stood to the east of Cross Nook in Pepper Moulds. The area by the notice board was kennels in 1803 and later a cartwright's shop. Continue down what was Burtrees Road to the bridge.

Station 6 on the bridge

At the centre of the bridge is the boundary with Whinfell. The stone bridge was washed away in the floods of 2009, and this single span metal bridge retains much of the previous sandstone walling. To reach this point the walk has passed a small hamlet which has developed from Bridgend Farm. This may well be the limit of the medieval village, but the name is first recorded in the registers in 1609. This farm held by the Pearsons for centuries until the mid c19th, but in the late C19th became the home farm of the Dixon's Lorton Hall Estate. Over the bridge in Whinfell on the left is Whinfell's corn mill, better known as Lorton Low Mill. By the C16th this was half owned by the Winders of Lorton Hall and later fully part of that estate, and called Low Lorton Mill. This was ruinous in the 1960s. Opposite is the double-fronted house of the miller, and close to the river a house developed from the pig pens which were commonly associated with millers. This area is subject to flooding. In 1803, when the Joshua Lucock owned Lorton Hall, there was a small footbridge linking this land with the hall's pleasure grounds. Looking over the Cocker to the hall's grounds, there are now two bungalows, where in 1803 there was Ivy Cottage, owned with the hall.

Return to Lorton Cross, noting that the wall on the left, built about 1890, enclosed Lorton Hall and its grounds from the bridge to the river opposite the Wheat Sheaf, This followed its acquisition by Thomas Dixon of Rheda Hall and then his son Anthony, who extensively rebuilt the hall.

Station 7 Lorton Hall tower

Here we should consider the origins of the Lorton Hall estate, and the building itself. We have here a pele tower which suggests that it was an old fortified hall built to resist the incursions of the Scots, or is it a

Victorian folly? Pevsner was fooled by it. Going back to the earliest records, we know that Low Lorton existed with a chapel in 1198, and that in 1230 Thomas Mariscal held the 'vill of Loreton' as a freehold manor under the superior lordship of the lord of Derwentfells manor. That meant that all 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 by an owner who had three daughters and no sons. By 1397 one of those thirds was in the hands of Margaret de Wyndere, or Margaret Winder, and so the Winders held the freehold estate for three hundred years until John Winder sold in 1699. Margaret Winder is likely to have held about six farm tenements, complete with feudal tenants, but by the 1530s Richard Winder lived in Lorton as the principal inhabitant and had acquired some of the tenanted land for his house and grounds. The oldest part of the buildings, the hall-range which is now Winder Hall, is dated 1663, but has earlier features. The abstract of deeds of 1691 show extensive property and tenants in the area, some of whom appear to be manorial tenants of the Winders.

The name Lorton Hall does not appear until 1702. Through the C18th the hall was owned by various minor gentry, including one family who will be considered at the Packhorse. The wider estate was sold off, but in 1800 Lorton Hall, its estate, the Packhorse and the Low Mill was acquired by Joshua Lucock of Cockermouth. He was the grandson of Joshua Lucock Esq of Cockermouth, who built Wordsworth House. Lucock came with his wife (and cousin) Rebecca and eventually one surviving child, the heir Raisbeck. Five more children were born in Lorton Hall. Four of the children suffered sudden collapses as young adults and were declared lunatics in 1834. Only the twins George and Elizabeth (see the Sunday School) were able to live normal lives. Joshua Lucock was an extreme character and village squire, and changed his name to Bragg in 1805 to inherit his uncle's Liverpool estate, which helped him purchase the manor of Loweswater and build up his local estate. Tragedies were heaped on this family. Joshua Lucock Bragg died 1809, his son George took over after his mother's death, and he built the western half as the new front, created the carriage drive, and built the folly tower without windows around 1840. But he was killed in a carriage accident in 1847, aged 40. Elizabeth and husband Robert Bridge returned from Dorset but were dead by 1857. This left Sarah and John in the care of attendants here until their death in 1875, presumably the origin of the ghost stories. In 1885 the Dixons of Rheda purchased the estate, and Anthony Dixon created the hall basically as seen today. It was broken up by auction sale in 1947. Move on to Winder Hall, noting that Stable Cottage, in an earlier form, was the cottage of the famous local auctioneer, Stephen Martin, in the first half of the C19th.

Station 8 Winder Hall drive

This house is private, but open as a country house hotel and it should be possible to walk up the drive. This new entrance and tree-lined carriage drive was created by George Lucock Bragg, around 1840. Note an ancient walnut further along on the right. The Lodge at the main entrance was the Dixon's gatehouse of the 1890s, once complete with a wheel to operate the wooden gates.

Fife Lodge, on the left past the path to the stables, was created from the Dixon's kitchen and dog kennels. The entrance to Winder Hall is a new access to through what was once the butler's pantry, but the main entrance is beyond the fence in the Lorton Hall Tower property. From here we can see the pleasure grounds of Lorton Hall, and to the north the large close called Guards which was once attached.

Walking back to the road, the boundary between the hall and Lorton Hall Lodge, as continued around the low-lying Guards close, was the C18th boundary between the hall lands and the next farmstead (purple and gray), which was owned by Joshua Lucock Bragg from 1806, purchased from John Fletcher. In 1578 it was called Kirkgate End and owned by the Peile family, while in the C19th the name had changed to Kirkstile or Churchstile. Part of the farmstead from 1806 (gray) was owned by Isabella Woodhouse, nee Fletcher, and turned into a residence called The Green. Isabella was a 'terribly fine' and religious lady, according to John Bolton. The whole of this farmstead was demolished by the Dixons around 1890.

Station 9, The Packhorse at Kirkgate End

Across the road from the entrance to Winder Hall is Packhorse Cottage. This and Church Croft was another farmstead at Kirkgate End owned by another of the Peile family. Probably the two Kirkgate Ends were one farm divided, because from the next farm towards Cockermouth, Holm Farm, the buildings were on both sides of the road, and the highway developed through the yards of the farmsteads. This farmstead at Kirkgate end contained the only inn in the village, believed by John Bolton to be known as the Kirk Stall or the inn at Kirkstile, deriving from the time when it provided facilities for those using the church. The Kirkgate will be the road to the church. The name Packhorse probably dates to or after 1734 when it was rebuilt by Thomas and Mary Barnes (nee Peill). Thomas had become a minor gentleman, probably through Whitehaven shipping, and their son, Thomas Peile Barnes, was able to purchase Lorton Hall in 1766. He brought the Packhorse and land into the Lorton Hall estate, his son John Peile-Barnes selling all to Joshua Lucock in 1800. The Lorton Hall lands in 1803 are shown light pink, including the Packhorse and its Church Croft.

The Packhorse was famous for its Candlemas Day Merry-Neet, with landlords George and Sally Chambers in the early C19th. Here there was a tradition of female succession, with their daughter Ann marrying a Churnsides in 1822 to become landlady, and their daughter Sarah marrying a Beattie in 1850 to become the landlady. The Packhorse closed in the 1920s.

Station 10 Holm Cottage

The next farm (green) was another freehold farm of the Pearsons, owned by Richard in 1649, together with an estate in High Lorton. It descended to Allan Pearson of Bridekirk and his heirs. Their tenants for forty years in the early C19th were John and Sally Ewart, whose family was so numerous that Sally boasted that she had six yards o' lads and eighteen yards o' lasses. It was purchased by George Lucock Bragg in the 1840s. He rationalised the landholdings to the north and south with those of his Kirkstile farm. Holm is the Old Norse for island, and the name, used in the C19th, probably refers to the piece of land over the river, still in Lorton between the old and new courses of the Cocker, which was called Holm in 1828. Over the road from Holm Cottage the Dixon family provided a reading room for the education of the local inhabitants. On the sale of the estate this was converted to a shop and dwelling. The shop closed around 1990.

Station 11 outside the Wheat Sheaf.

In the early C19th there were three other farmsteads in the row in Low Lorton. The Wheat Sheaf (dark pink) appears in the records as a public house in 1847, and Henry Fletcher combined that trade with farming a small amount of land. His father was John Fletcher, the veterinary and smallholder, known as Old Doc Fletcher, who was a favourite singer at clippings with a thin quavery voice.

Next the dwelling called Homestead (blue) was still a farmstead in 1818, owned by a non-resident John Fisher, but it did not survive long as a farm, becoming dwellings and Smithy Cottage. We do not know the identities of the people in the inscription, MWA, 1679, but it may be a Michael Williamson. In the plant growth by the river in front of the C19th Smithy, now converted, there are the remains of a rig for putting steel bands on cartwheels. Croft House completes the old village and was another property of the prosperous Pearson family, once called Low Lorton Tenement. Further over the road was just a barn in the C19th, with a hemp garth behind from the days when rope and twine was made locally. It may be that one or more further farmsteads opposite have been lost. The row of crofts ends where Wythe Gill crosses the road, and that stream, with an old road along it, would seem the probable end of the village.

Station 12 Great Close

Continue on along the ancient road past the sewage works to the entrance to Great Close. This road continues through the fields and provided a footway to Rogerscale, via a footbridge. This would once have been the shared meadow land of Low Lorton, the farmsteads having holdings here as well as in the arable furlongs of Lorton Field. This land, and that of Lorton Field, seems too much for the C19th population of Low Lorton, suggesting that a number of farmsteads may have been lost over the centuries. Records from 1578 suggest that there were once 18 tenements.

To return, either take the loop round to Church Lane past the Old Vicarage, or return back to the Packhorse cottage and along the road over church croft to enter the church yard. It is most likely that this field road or footpath has been exactly here and used for the same purpose for at least 800 years.

Station 13 Churchyard.

Some time spent in the churchyard will give a closer connection with the people who lived in Low and High Lorton. The Lucock-Bragg family are under the beech tree. But do not spend too much time pondering over the Winder Vault. There is no such thing. The upper yeomanry in the C16th & C17th had the privilege of being buried in the floor of the church, and that is where Richard Winder, d.1544, and the others are.

Acknowledgements

The above is based partly on the work of other historians who have studied Lorton: -

John Bolton 'Lorton as it was 80 years ago,' 1891

Angus Winchester *Landscape and society in medieval Cumbria*, 1984

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

More information is available through the website of the Lorton & Derwent Fells Local History Society www.derwentfells.com. The wider area is covered on www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk

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