

Lorton & Derwent fells

Local history Society



Photo: Cumbrian Newspapers Ltd

Two of Lorton's well known inhabitants. Enter our competition - details inside!

Secretary's letter

I expect that more New Year's greetings will be expressed this year than usual due to the date, so I'm not going overboard! All I want to say is a sincere happy New Year to all readers.

Before I leave the topic of the year, I should like to mention that I had hoped to produce the front cover in colour for this issue. But in looking into the costs, I found that it would be very expensive - well over £100 just to get enough A3 sheets photocopied with only a half of one side filled! So what I have decided to do is to investigate other methods, for example using an A3 computer printer, so that if a suitable subject comes up in the future, I could print them myself. If anyone knows of a technique to produce A3 colour copies more cheaply, then I should be really glad to hear about it.

This issue sees the end of Walter Head's history of the Yew Tree Hall. He felt that he shouldn't dwell too long on the recent history so he has skipped through the last 50 years fairly quickly. His history has been most interesting and I'm very grateful to him for being able to serialise it. Just for the record, the Yew Tree Hall history started in Newsletter No 13, January 1998. And talking of serials, the first of a very welcome two part serial starts in this issue. It is by Ron George and is a small part of his forthcoming history of the Lorton parish; the first part is a general survey of old buildings in Lorton and the final part will describe his own house, White Ash (for reasons which he gives in the article).

At our members' evening in November, David Herrod made the important observation that any photographs put into our archive - or anyone's archive of course - should only be black and white and printed on fibre base paper. This rules out all colour prints and black and white prints on plastic coated paper. Afterwards, David kindly set his views down in writing and so for a fuller story, please see his article in this Newsletter. He has also given me details of some professional labs who would be able to do archival printing.

The Society is a member of the Cumbria Local History Federation and in their Spring 1999 Bulletin, they asked for sponsors for their local history prizes for Cumbrian school students. This scheme is now in its third year and it was decided that our society would contribute. I have recently received a letter from the Federation Secretary telling me that this year's winners are:

- Year eleven (age about 16): 1st prize Laura Thompson (Penrith)
 2nd prize Kathryn Wood (Egremont) and John Colman (St Aidan's, Carlisle)
- Years 7 to 9 (ages 12 to 14): 1st prize Sarah Dobbinson (Penrith)
 2nd prize Tom Curtis (Penrith)
 3rd prize Andy Swincoe (Appleby)

The point was made that although there were a good many entrants for the competition, there are still not as many as the committee would like and Federation members and member societies (that's us!) are being urged to approach senior schools in their own localities to take part. So if anyone might be interested in promoting the competition in any of our local schools, please contact Ron George or me and we'll find out exactly what would be involved.



We have featured the Lorton yew tree in the last two Newsletters and now it's in the news again! Derek Denman gave me the page from the News and Star and I've put it on the front cover (in case you hadn't noticed it!). Derek thought that it would be a good idea to have a competition where you are all invited to think up suitable captions for it. I fully agree and he has started the ball rolling with two captions:

"I'm sorry Mr Tyson, but I was only climbing to look for Wordsworth's initials"

"Ron takes some larger cuttings to root as millennium yews!"

Now over to you! Captions to me please at Clouds Hill, High Lorton (or michael@lorton.freemove.co.uk) before 31 January and the best will be given in the next Newsletter.

The Yew Tree Hall history - 1950 to 2000 by Walter Head

In 1951, a village field day was held to celebrate the Festival of Britain and raise funds for the Yew Tree Hall. Also, the present management committee format was implemented. The hall heating was again the source of complaints and a Baxendale stove was purchased to try and rectify the situation, with a second one purchased in 1952. Electrical heating was rejected due to the high cost of installation and bottle gas heating was rejected due to the high maintenance costs involved.

In 1956, following a critical report from the Fire Officer, panic bolts were fitted to the outer doors and new fire fighting equipment purchased. The Low Lorton Mens Club was disbanded and the balance of its funds of £6-11-0 (£6.55) transferred to the Yew Tree Hall.

The hall was partly rewired in 1958 and the kitchen moved from downstairs to its present position adjacent to the supper room. The provision of a car park at the east end of the hall (ie the bridge end) was discussed in 1966 but planning permission was not granted. Flood damage to the beck side wall of the hall was repaired by Walker Brothers at a cost of £32.

Miss Samson retired in 1970 after over 30 years' service on the committee and was presented with a table lamp. By 1973, the hall was insured for £7000.

1974 was the year of the fuel crisis and paraffin stoves were used to enable the hall to function as normal. Two gales during the year caused damage to the roof and wall tiles. By 1984, the hall was insured for £70,000.

In 1985, the hall was designated a Listed Historical Building despite objections by the committee who were fearful of the extra cost which would be incurred. Painting of the hall interior was completed.

Heritage Construction Engineers carried out a survey on the hall in 1987, extensive roof repairs were carried out in 1989 and further rewiring in 1990.

A new wooden floor was installed in the main hall in 1992. First Estimates/Quotes had been obtained for this in 1955 and by 1959, the Minutes show that a new floor was considered to be an urgent requirement.

The "Jennings Plaque" was erected on the outer wall in 1995. And in 1996, more rewiring was necessary following the finding of potentially dangerous lead-covered cable; this ensured that the hall wiring was all plastic covered and in good condition. A new electrical heating system was installed in 1998 to make the heating more uniform. In 1999, a new wooden floor was laid in the supper room to match that in the main hall which itself was re-sanded and varnished to remove unevenness due to swelling. The hall was insured for £275,000.

The Yew Tree Hall building, fabric, fittings and finances are now in a good position to enter into the new millennium.

Chairman's Chat

I was pleased to see how well the November Members' Evening worked out. It is always rather worrying beforehand wondering how much material will be brought along. I know it will get progressively more difficult as we do this more often because, although new members will not have seen material brought on previous occasions, most members will have done so. There are of course two remedies to this situation. The first and least desirable is not to have more than very very occasional members' evenings. The second is for more members to bring along items of interest. These items need not be much more than personal interest, such as a study of the history of his/her house since it is for the individual to 'sell' his/her interest and spread it to a wider audience.

This concept leads on to the wider consideration of our regular evening meetings, and I would like to re-iterate and expand on the original aims of the Society. These were printed on the original membership cards.

but this has not been done recently so I reproduce them here, slightly abbreviated, for the benefit of new members (and to jog the memories of the original members!).

1. To study in depth all aspects of the history of the area comprising the ancient Manor of Derwent Fells and the adjacent areas, up to and including the present time.
2. To provide an opportunity for individual members to meet, discuss and exchange notes regarding their individual interests and researches.
3. To encourage and organise occasional fieldwork as and when appropriate.
4. To produce periodic newsletters.
5. To work towards publishing members' original work.
6. To work towards the provision of a local archive of relevant material extracted from National, Regional and personal archives; to create an archive of current events; to provide an archive for consultation by the general public.
7. The seventh and last is just as important as all the others - to try and ensure that individual members derive fun and enjoyment from all the above activities.

It may not be generally known, but much of the above has been, and continues to be achieved, both by the Society and by individual members, BUT, and there always is a BUT, we have not managed to achieve 100% of our aims. I would love to see more members from rather further afield, from Buttermere, Mockerkin and Wythop; for many more members to take an active interest in some aspect of the aims outlined; and a serious attempt made to record the present as it affects this valley, and in particular the farming community.

One activity I mentioned at the last meeting was the idea of everyone rushing out with a camera to record what could be seen of original buildings and changes thereto when houses, barns and anything else was being repaired or modified. We can all do this so easily, and I am grateful and indebted to David Herrod for drawing our collective attention to the fact that colour photographs will not give a permanent and indelible record for the delight of future historians. Black and white photographs on fibre base paper are recommended, but, with diffidence, I suggest that what we really need is a combination of all possible methods, perhaps B/W and colour and backed up on CDs. [See David's article in this Newsletter - MSG]

Do we have any more ideas for a Society Millennium project? One idea that David Herrod has suggested is for a document outlining, or perhaps detailing, present day community activities under various headings. This appears to be a good idea. It would happily fall into several of the Society's aims quoted above and could very easily be a compilation of the work of various members, each suited to a particular field of activity. Come on folks, let me hear from you on this score, or any others.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity of wish all our members a very special Happy New Year and that all goes well and peacefully for them in the year MM.

Ron George

Archiving photographs

by David Herrod

Conventional photography is based on the reaction of silver compounds to light. In black and white photography, the silver remains to form the image and, being a metal, is fairly stable. As long as such photographs are not stored in a hostile environment, such as one containing acids, sulphates, or excessive moisture, they will last a very long time. One other factor, which affects the longevity, is the base material to which the photographic emulsion is attached. Paper is the common material, but there are two kinds - resin coated and fibre base. Resin coated, as the name suggests, has a film of plastic bonded to it, which supports the photographic emulsion. This is designed for rapid machine processing. Plastics degrade with time and this material is not considered to be a satisfactory base for archival photographs. Fibre base paper is the better alternative. This is stable, but absorbs the processing chemicals. As the final chemical in the process is acidic, it is imperative that this is neutralised and removed. Properly processed black and white photographs, on fibre base paper, stored in acid free boxes is considered to be the best way of archiving images.

Colour photographs, on the other hand, although having the added advantage of colour to portray realism, are relatively short lived. You only have to examine a family photograph which has been sitting on the

window cill for a while, for this to be apparent. In colour photographs, although still using silver compounds as the light sensitive medium, these are replaced by coloured dyes during processing. Dyes are unstable and degrade with time. Ultra violet light accelerates this degradation. Also, colour photographic paper is resin coated and so, on both counts, this is not considered to be a suitable method for archiving images.

Turning to newer technology - digital imaging. This is based on electronics, rather than chemistry. At the moment, due to technical limitations, digital images do not have anywhere near the same resolution as a conventional photograph. Also, if stored magnetically e.g. video tape, other magnetic fields, such as the earth's, will corrupt the data stored. If etched on to a CD, this can be considered to be permanent and might seem to be a good solution, until one considers the rate at which technology is changing. What seems to be high tech now will probably have disappeared into the mists of time by 2100. Our descendants then might be as bemused by a compact disc as we were at the last meeting, looking at a large wooden disc and trying to decide whether it was the cover to a loo, or a board for making butter on.

It is ironic that the medium by which we enjoy seeing glimpses of life from the last century is still the best for passing on glimpses of our life to those who will follow us at the end of the next century.

Vernacular buildings in the Lorton valley - part 1, an overview

by Ron George

It is very unlikely that any house in either High or Low Lorton that was newly built in the vernacular style as defined by Brunskill¹ around 1700 (as were virtually all the older houses), is today just as it was first built. The great wave of rebuilding that swept the country from about 1600 onwards eventually reached Lorton well into the second half of the Century, although there is some evidence that a little re-building did take place rather earlier; William Peile of Nether Lorton had a "new barne" in 1623². Nevertheless, then as now, the north country tended to lag behind the times relative to the south east. The yeoman's house, such as we find in Lorton, came into being between approximately 1660 and 1760. We do not know just what was the trigger that encouraged the population to undertake this, for them a considerable building programme, but for yeomen farmers, the latter part of the 17th century was a period of growing economic plenty. Signs of this are evident in the Wills of the period. Clearly a greater degree of affluence, and legislation that gave a greater sense of long-term security, must have played a large part. No doubt also that the re-building of the houses, barns and byres of each farming household would be a gradual effort spread over years. On the other hand, for the wage-earning labourers, this was a time of rising prices and falling wages, and times were hard. For them, the time of improving economics came much later, nearer to the end of the 18th century or even later.

Reputedly the oldest building in Low Lorton, apart from the early sections of Lorton Hall, is Holme Cottage, believed to date from about 1660, not quite contemporary with the Elizabethan section of Lorton Hall, of which it was the home farm. There is substantial evidence that Smithy Cottage at Low Lorton was built about 1670-1672³. A cottage at Scales bears the inscription "T P 1668" on a main beam in the "firehouse", and is therefore the "new fire house" mentioned in the Will of Thomas Peile, 10th February 1673⁴. This derelict cottage was visited by this Society membership several years back, when it was expected to be restored. For lack of resources, it is now being allowed to become a complete loss. In High Lorton, "Mid-Town Cottage" bears the inscription and date "P W ☆ 1678" (almost certainly Peter Wilkinson, the central emblem is a star) over the door into what is now the garden. The position of this and the interior layout suggest to some that originally this was the front of the house. "Mid-Town" is first mentioned by name in the church registers in 1638, on the occasion of the burial of Ellin, the wife of John Peile. Other features of High Lorton tend to reinforce the popular but unsubstantiated theory that the road was once on the opposite side of the houses from its present position. It is clear from the 1649 survey⁵ that the road bore the same relation

¹ Defined by Brunskill in "Vernacular Architecture of the Lake Counties", p15, as "the products of local craftsmen meeting simple functional requirements according to traditional plans and procedures and with the aid of local building material and constructional methods".

² LDFLHS W.026

³ LDFLHS W.065

⁴ LDFLHS W.088

⁵ C.R.O. (old reference) EM.5/1 ff.45-62

determined today. The text gives details such as dwelling, barne, byre, ox-house, plum garth, etc. for the various holdings, but this diagram makes no effort to show these details so no more is known of them than their stated existence.

Where farm buildings were separate from the dwelling, they were quite likely of even rougher stone-work, the animals not requiring the same degree of comfort as the family, however meagre this latter would have been. Meagre and lacking in any comfort by twentieth century criteria they certainly were, as is apparent from study of the probate inventories. (But that leads to a major diversion, and not to be followed during this article). There is only indirect evidence of the earliest buildings, as none survives physically. It is commonly believed that, before the "great re-building" of the late 17th/18th centuries and in spite of the over abundance of stone, the houses were in general small, largely built round a cruck frame, with clay or wattle-and-daub infill with a roof of turf or straw or bracken thatch. Slight evidence for this is found in a probate inventory of 1586⁶ of Peter Peill, the elder, of Lorton. This mentions a debt for thatching, though not whether it was for a dwelling-house or out-building; and possible evidence of thatch was found by the author under the ruins of the roof of the cottage at Scales, bearing a date 1668, mentioned above. Even better and far more definitive evidence is one of the rare references to house building and repair found in the Court records. As late as 1715, Charles Fletcher, Daniell and William Stubb, John Fletcher and Robert Height, all of Withop Mill were presented by the village turnman and fined 3s 4d each for cutting "turf for fewel to the prejudice of sheep-heathes and of getting flax for the repair of houses"⁷.

Yet, we must question this picture as far as Lorton is concerned. The quarry at Scawgill had been in use since early medieval times and the 1649 Survey⁸ quite specifically states there is no timber of value for house-boot (that is, repair) and by implication, construction of houses. But on the other hand, it specifically states there is an adequate supply of quarry stone and slate for building. It may not be wholly by chance that the first mention of "Slater" in the church registers appears in 1697⁹ and that no other occupations were mentioned until 1719, after which several slaters appear in that record, though the death of another is recorded by his own probate inventory in 1708. But this is no proof that slate roofing was just then introduced, as prior to that isolated instance in 1701, the registers did not give details of occupation at all. Yet again in 1598, Cuthbert Peile of Lorton died being owed 14s "for mendinge of glasse windowes"¹⁰. We must not read too much into this for, although it must be doubtful that a daub and wattle hut had glass windows, regrettably their owner was not stated; and it could have referred to a substantial Lorton Hall, or a large house elsewhere, because Cuthbert had business debts owing from as far afield as Gilcrux and Wasdale Head. At this time, Lorton's houses normally had a single open hearth fire-place in the single all purpose room, commonly known as the "fire-house", though the better houses might have a "bower" loft over one end. Documentary evidence for this is found in the Survey of 1649 and the Hearth Tax returns of 1664. Of the 16 dwellings shown on the 1649 schematic (above), at the end of the 20th century we can reasonably postulate that only six of the buildings we see might go that far back, or are rebuilt, perhaps to include part of the earlier structure. Something like ten have disappeared, apparently without physical trace above ground. Until further evidence is uncovered, we will have to assume that the poorer housing in the community was of thatched daub and wattle construction, with cloth hangings over the windows; and that by the mid 18th century, some of the better off already had stone-built slate-roofed homes, probably with glass in their windows.

Certainly the new buildings, when they came, were solidly constructed using various combinations of slate and beck-stones. Main walls were massively built with a double skin of stone-work 20 to 24 inches thick with a loose rubble infill, the whole erected directly onto the rocky soil, no significant foundation or foot being laid. The slates on the outer skin of the external wall would be slightly slanted down on the outside to allow rain to run off. The result was a dry, weatherproof construction that has stood the test of time and stands sound to this day. These walls would support the weight of a slated roof, and the lovely "green" Honister slates were added to give the fine mellow appearance these roofs soon acquire, and which blend so well with the environment. This pleasing and traditional result is the bane of the lives of folks who wish to improve their property in the late 20th century. The Lake District Special Planning Board (LDSPB), which has control over development, tends to insist on use of these slates for new roofs, notwithstanding the fact

⁶ LDFLHS W.129, dated November 1586

⁷ C.R.O. D & C Court Leet May 1715

⁸ C.R.O. (old reference) EM.5/1 ff. 98/99

⁹ William Bell and John Iredale, Lorton baptism register, May 1697

¹⁰ LDFLHS W.220

that the Buttermere slate quarry may be closed, as it was for a number of years during the late 20th century. In fact second hand slates are often stipulated, and it is not unknown for unsuspecting owners to have their roofs removed by unprincipled members of society, to meet this demand. This slur on the population does not refer to any inhabitant of the Lorton valley area. Whitewashing the outer walls was not done until much later, but was sufficiently in vogue in the 19th century to earn Wordsworth's ire¹¹.

White Ash was the house that led me to study the history of this valley and found your local history society. So let me, in part 2 of this article, deal with this old farmhouse, which is reasonably typical of its fellows in the village, and discuss it in some detail.

Tithe maps by Michael Grieve

I have recently obtained copies of the 1840 Lorton tithe map, tithe apportionments and tithe general correspondence from the Public Record Office at Kew. They were on display at our members' evening in November and will be available for research when they go into our archive. Our Society covers quite a wide area and so the question arises - should we obtain some of the other relevant ones? I'm thinking here in particular of Brackenthwaite and Loweswater and maybe Mockerkin and Pardshaw. The tithe maps are important and they are the first large-scale maps produced of the whole of each area.

So we would like your views on whether we should buy the tithe information for other areas and, if so, which ones. The Lorton set cost about £30 and although the maps are photocopied at too small a size, they are still very useful for reference. Please contact Ron George or me with your views and we'll do the rest!

Mainly for our country members?



In a violent storm at the end of November 1999, a very large branch came down from the famous yew tree in Lorton. It fell over Whit Beck, just missing doing serious damage to the house opposite. The photograph on the front cover was taken by the News and Star soon afterwards.

Having had an article about the tree and subsequent comment in the last two Newsletters, it's quite a coincidence that this should happen now.

There have been several reports that the tree will survive but I do not know whether these are based on expert opinion. Perhaps more will be known in time for the next Newsletter.

Anyway, for the record and particularly for our country members, here is a photograph of the tree, as it now is, from the bridge over Whit Beck, in all its asymmetric glory!
MSG

Our next meeting

is on Thursday, 13 January when Barry McKay will tell us about "Chap Books". Barry is the Chairman of the Cumbria Local History Federation and I understand that chap books were used by chapmen (really!) who were pedlars and they used them for well, to find out, come along!

¹¹ William Wordsworth "Guide to the Lakes" ed. Ernest de selincourt. pp.77 et. Seq. Oxford paperbacks OUP 1984