

**Field-names and agrarian history:
reflections from Cumbria**

English Place-Name Society Annual Lecture, 16 October 2021

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Field-names, the majority of which do not appear on Ordnance Survey maps, are among the most minor of place-names, yet they offer a rich level of detail which can bring the landscape alive at the most local of scales. It has long been recognised that the fine-grained texture of naming they provide sheds light on many aspects of agrarian history, ranging from former land use and land ownership patterns to how local environments were perceived in the past. Although most field-name assemblages have evolved over time, as new names have replaced old ones, some contain names which have endured for several centuries, making them a repository of local memory.

Such minor names are a valuable source for the evolution of the farming landscape, especially when combined with other records. They form a particularly rich body of evidence in old-enclosed regions like Cumbria, where limited ‘re-writing’ of the farming landscape occurred during the ‘age of Improvement’ in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and where yeoman farming families often persisted, transmitting field-names down the generations. These circumstances have probably led to a higher rate of survival of early field-names in Cumbria than in some other areas.

Focusing on the Lake District, my aim in this lecture is to introduce something of the richness of field-names, by looking at some examples of how different field-naming patterns map onto different elements in the agrarian landscape. A final section introduces a neglected aspect of minor names—the very local names (the equivalent of field-names) which formerly populated the open common land of the Lakeland fellsides.

As a starting point I should like to look at the field-names at Hill Park, a farm near Colton, in Furness Fells, collected by volunteers in 2017 as part of a community project to record minor names in the area (fig. 1).¹ As

¹ The ‘Mapped Histories’ project was part of the Rusland Horizons Landscape Partnership Scheme, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Publications arising from the project included a guide to field-names (Winchester 2017) and two books reporting on

is so often the case, the Ordnance Survey's coverage of names in the area on the Six-Inch map is restricted to the names of the farmstead itself and some of the woods; the fields remain blank spaces.

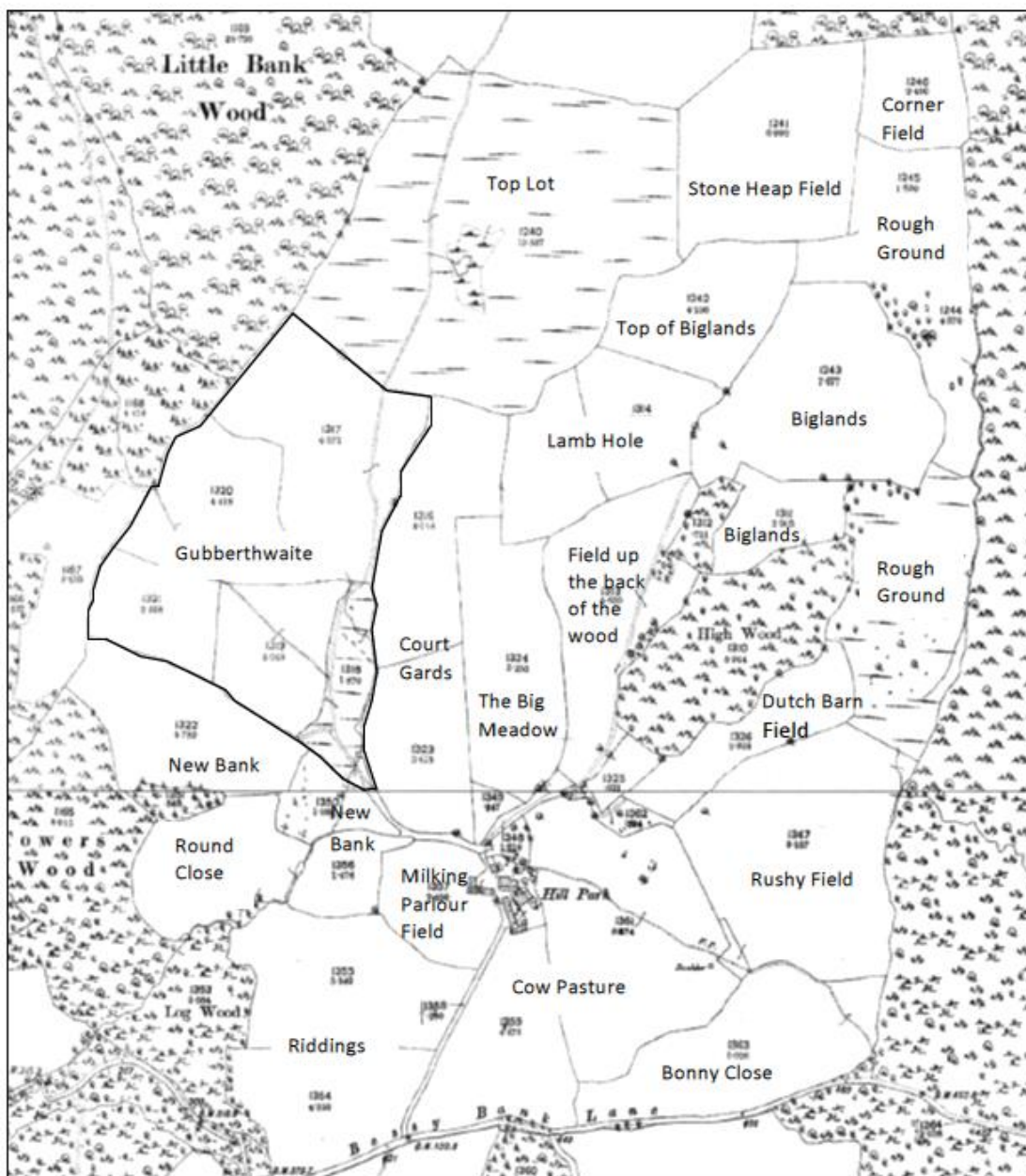


Figure 1. Field-names at Hill Park Farm, Colton (Lancashire), collected in 2017. Base map: OS 1:2,500 plan, Lancashire sheets VII.12 and VII.16 (surveyed 1888).

The names of the fields mapped in 2017 are those known to the current owners, whose family has farmed here since before the Second World War.

the project's findings, Rusland Horizon Mapped Histories Volunteers (2019), and Martin, Jones and Kingston (2018).

Many of the names are clearly recent, some demonstrably so (Milking Parlour Field is named from the milking parlour built in the 1950s). Names in modern English, describing the shape (Round Close), location (Corner Field) or vegetation (Rushy Field) of each plot are, on the face of it, also modern. However, other names are almost certainly of some antiquity, inherited from previous generations and exhibiting something of the time-depth characteristic of field-names in Cumbria. The block of fields named Gubberthwaite presumably contains ON *þveit* ‘clearing; enclosed pasture’, a term which came to be incorporated into Cumbrian dialect and was still understood c.1600 (Winchester 2017: 54–55). Riddings is ME *rydding* ‘cleared land’; Court Gards, at the centre of the farm’s land, is ‘the enclosures (‘garths’) around the court’, ‘court’ probably referring here to the monastic farm on the site of Hill Park in the Middle Ages. In one instance, Field up the back of the wood, the field is known to have had an older name but it has passed from memory. That was presumably also the case with the demonstrably modern names. Field-names are thus often a multi-period assemblage, some coined comparatively recently; others having passed by oral transmission from the distant past.

As with all place-names, care is needed when interpreting field-names, a problem exacerbated by the comparatively late forms available for most names. The majority of field-names in Cumbria are only recorded in nineteenth-century sources, especially the tithe plans of the 1840s and estate plans. In some cases, the only record is even more recent, in printed sales particulars of later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century date, for example. Where earlier records survive, it becomes clear that some modern forms are distortions of the original name. Pigeon Croft, for example, a field at Finsthwaite in Furness Fells, so named in 1851, can be traced back in that form to 1719, but earlier records indicate an origin not in the name of a bird but as a reference to woodland. The forms *Pincher/Pincha Croft* (early eighteenth cent.), *Pynshowe* 1582 and *Phinchawe* 1609, suggest that the generic was ‘shaw’ (OE *sceaga* ‘copse’).² Shoulthwaite, another *þveit* name, was the name of a field at Stair, near Keswick, in 1841 and can be traced back to 1578, when it was recorded as *Showlthwate*. However, in a survey of 1758 it was rendered *Should Hatt* in one entry and *Spouldered* in another, forms which would clearly have thrown a researcher off-track, had that been the only source available.³

² Sources are given in Winchester (2017: 22), and Martin, Jones and Kingston (2018: 90).

³ Cumbria Archive Service [hereafter CAS], DRC 8/55; Cockermouth Castle Muniments (formerly CAS, DLEC), box 300 (Brown’s survey, 1758), box 301 (Percy survey 1578).

As elsewhere in England, the lexicon of Cumbrian field-names extends across a wide range of meanings and allusions: shape and size; topography; vegetation and wildlife; land use, crops and livestock; land tenure; perceived quality of the land; archaeological sites; folklore, etc.⁴ Dialect terms, many bearing witness to the persistence of the Scandinavian legacy in Cumbria, abound in names recording topographical features and vegetation: *how* ‘hill’, *slack* ‘hollow’, *holme* ‘island; riverside meadow’, *allon/allan* ‘land by a stream almost surrounded by water’, *ing* ‘meadow’, *syke* ‘small stream, ditch’, *keld* ‘well, spring’, *swang* ‘wet swampy hollow’, *scroggs* ‘stunted bushes’, *burtree* ‘elder bush’, *hollins* ‘holly’, *withe* ‘willow’, *whin* ‘gorse’, for example.⁵

Human associations include references to crops and livestock, such as *bigg* ‘barley’, *havver* ‘oats’, *we(a)ther/wedder* ‘wether’ and *capple* ‘horse’—again exhibiting a strong Norse legacy. Shape and size are recorded in dialect names like *Tram*, signifying a long, narrow field (the root meaning of close parallel lines led to its use for the shafts of a cart or barrow). References to slender garments, such as *Shirtsleeve* and *Stay tape*, had the same sense. Triangular fields, if not termed ‘gore’ or ‘garbred’ (OE *gāra*, triangular piece of ground; ME *gar-brede* ‘broad strip in a corner of an open field’), were sometimes known as Heater, alluding to the shape of the heating box of a smoothing iron. The experience of working the land might be recorded in measures of labour, such as ‘daywork’ (sometimes contracted to *darrock*, or even *dork*), or in a comment on the field’s perceived quality: Meal Ark (literally ‘flour chest’) and Honey Pot were rich, fertile fields; Hunger Bannock and Hopeless Meadow poor ones. These examples give a flavour of the dialect-rich vocabulary of field-names in Cumbria, forming a distinctive regional variant of the range of names found across England.

Field-names and agrarian history

My particular interest in field-names lies in placing them in their context as part of the agrarian landscape, by relating them to the various components which make up the field pattern. In Lake District valleys, several recurring field patterns are found, deriving from the different historical processes which combined to create the ‘fieldscape’ typical of the region. If we strip away the rectilinear enclosures on the fells created by Parliamentary enclosure in the century after 1760, when most of the lower fell commons and some higher ones were divided, four distinctive

⁴ As amply illustrated in Field (1993), which is arranged thematically.

⁵ For lists of field-names in Cumbria, see PN Cu and PN We, where most of these elements are noted. Winchester (2017: 40–56) contains a glossary of common elements.

elements can be identified. First, where there was a sufficiently large expanse of level, free-draining soils on the valley floor, a pattern of thin, strip-like fields was often found by the nineteenth century, resulting from the enclosure of open arable fields, generally in the seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Small medieval open fields were found on level, well-drained land in many of the wider Lake District valleys, like those adjacent to the villages at Braithwaite, Buttermere, Coniston and Grasmere, for example. Second, in contrast to the former open fields, the lower slopes of the fellsides are usually an enclosed landscape of small, irregular fields, some of which can be shown to have originated in peasant colonisation in the thirteenth century. Third, on the edges of the common land on the fells are intakes, often of rough, unimproved pasture, most of which probably date from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Finally, the heads of several valleys were retained in demesne in the medieval period as private seigniorial pastures. Some were enclosed as a deer park or other analogous enclosure; others took the form of demesne cattle farms or vaccaries. The landscapes associated with seigniorial control tend to include large fellside enclosures of a scale quite different from that of the fields of the farming community.⁶

Looking at field-names in relation to these different elements in the agrarian landscape can help to elucidate both the names and the evolution of the field pattern. Anyone examining field-names in Cumbria will be struck by a recurring contrast in the patterning of names. In some areas a block of contiguous fields shared a common name (High Avelands, Low Avelands, Great Avelands, Wilkinson's Avelands, for example);⁷ elsewhere, each field bore its own individual name. A first question is thus: how do these contrasting field-naming patterns map onto different elements in the field pattern?

Where groups of fields shared a common name, the implication is that they represent parts of what was previously a larger unit of shared resource which carried that name. When that resource was enclosed and divided, the new enclosures continued to be referred to by the original name. Shared agrarian resources were numerous and extensive in medieval Cumbria, not only open arable fields but also common meadows, shared pastures, woods and peat mosses (Winchester 1987: 68–77).

'Block' field-names can often indicate the extent of former open fields, thus being a particularly valuable source of evidence in a region in which most open arable land was enclosed without leaving a documentary record. A group of strip-like fields sharing a common name are likely to preserve

⁶ The evolution of the rural landscape is discussed by Winchester (1987: 37–54).

⁷ Lorton tithe plan (1840), parcels 186, 187, 189, 191: CAS, DRC 8/118.

the memory and name of a furlong in a former open field. Most open fields in Cumbria were enclosed piecemeal by agreement between the later sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries in a process involving exchanges of strips, thus creating the pattern of thin, strip fields which preserve in their boundaries the curves of former plough ridges and furlongs.

Several elements, characteristic of open-field furlongs, recur. *Lands* were the strips of ploughland in an open field; in field-names the element is often combined with specifics alluding to a wide range of characteristics: shape (Longlands), crops (Bigglands), fertility (Sourlands), for example. *Riggs* and *dales* (as in names such as Millriggs, Twenty Riggs, Longdales, Thackdales) were alternative terms for plough ridges, *dale* having the sense of a share or *dole* of a communal resource. *Butts* were shorter plough ridges in an open field, often in a corner and at a different angle from adjacent, longer plough strips; hence the widespread occurrence of the field-name Shortbutts. *Flat(t)*, sometimes used as a simplex name, was often synonymous with *furlong*, a bundle of strips in an open field.

Such naming patterns abound in the village landscapes which fringe the Lake District, on the Cumberland plain, in the Eden Valley and down the Furness peninsula. Many of these areas possessed extensive open fields, such as those belonging to the village of Gilcrux, north of Cockermouth (fig. 2). The open fields north and south of the village appear to have been enclosed after 1648, when the manor court ordered that the open strips were to be 'laid together, every man's by itselfe'. To the west of the village was a wedge of common land, most of which became an 'outfield', tilled in sections on a long-ley rotation, which was enclosed in 1754, leaving only a narrow strip of common to be enclosed in 1814 (Winchester 1987: 75–76; Winchester and Crosby 2006: 85–87). The furlong names on the former open fields included Croft (the core of the fields, running back from the farmsteads on both sides of the village) and topographical names, like Ellen Bank (from its position beside the River Ellen), Dikelands (beside the 'head-dyke' separating the farmland from the common), and Potlands (probably alluding to a deep hole). The large block of fields named Foreland may represent a medieval extension to the cultivated fields, organised separately from the village's main open fields (Sheppard 1973: 170–72).

In marked contrast to former open-field areas, individually-named fields characterise the early-enclosed landscapes of the Lake District, many of which were the product of colonisation during the phase of population growth in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Numerous fields bear the generic name Close, qualified by a specific alluding to a distinguishing

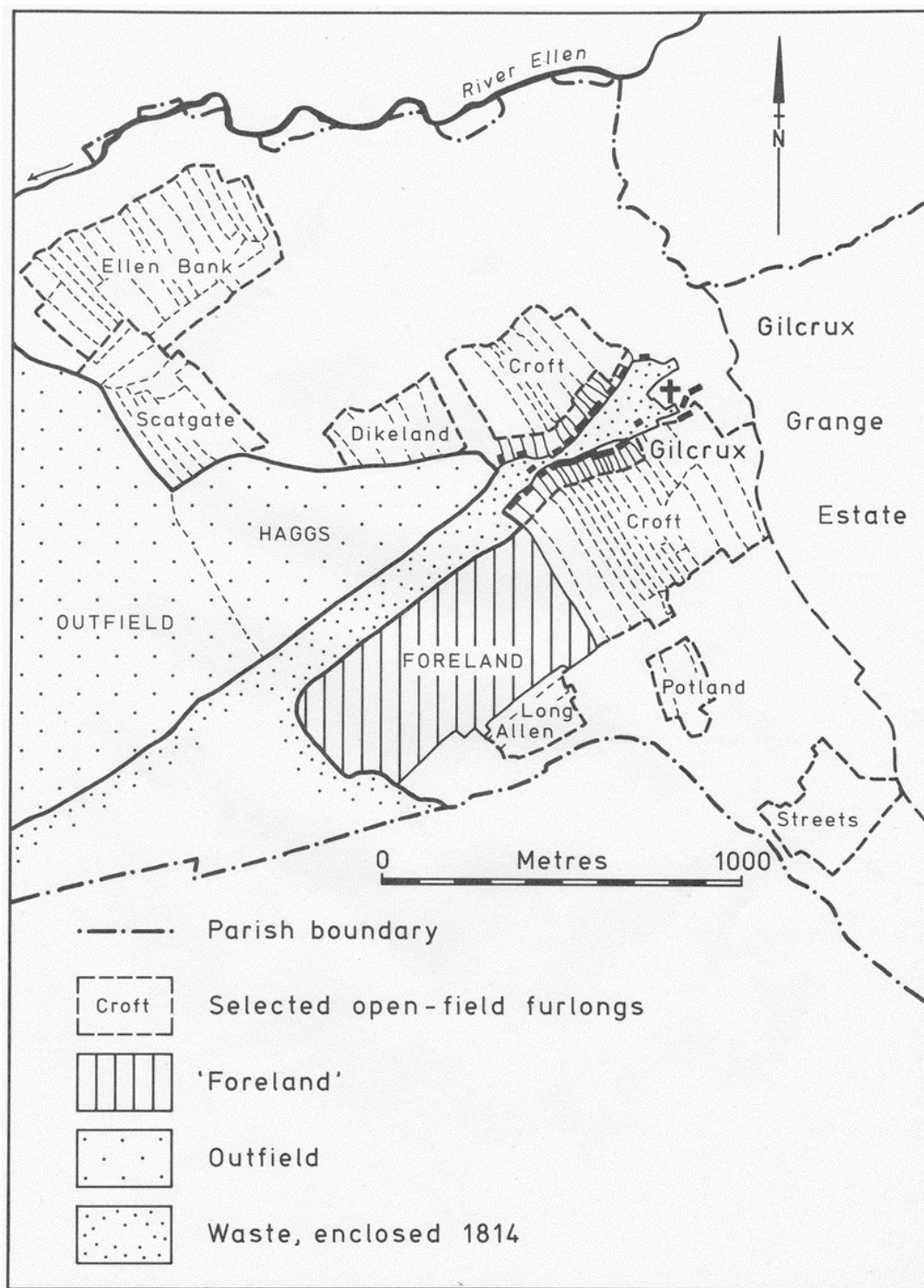


Figure 2. Gilcrux (Cumbria), field-names recorded on the tithe plan of 1843 (CAS, DRC/8/78), preserving the names of open-field furlongs.

feature. Other names referring to the enclosed character of the landscape include Croft, the name given to a level and fertile field close to the farmstead; Garth, a very small enclosure; Pickle (ME *pightel*), a small

enclosure; and Parrock, also a small enclosure, a little larger than a ‘garth’ but smaller than a ‘croft’.

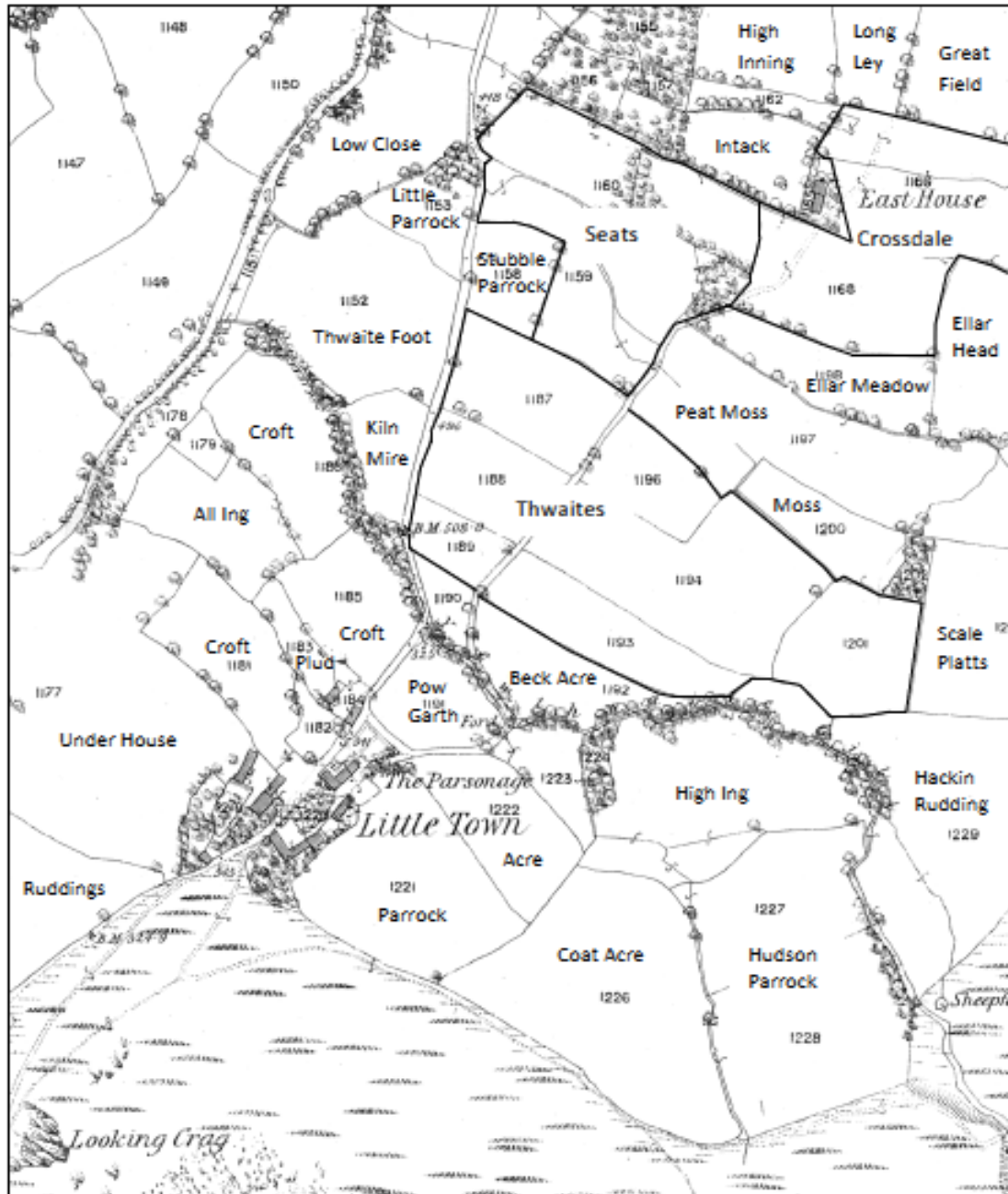


Figure 3. Little Town, Newlands valley (Cumbria): field-names from the tithe plan of 1841 (CAS, DRC/8/55) in an area of thirteenth-century colonisation.
Base map: OS 1:2,500 plan, Cumberland sheet LXIV.13 (surveyed 1862).

Some names in old-enclosed landscapes allude to the process of woodland clearance and colonisation. Thwaite (ON *þveit* ‘clearing; enclosed pasture’) continued in active use when naming newly enclosed land until at least c.1300. Ridding and its variants *ridding* and *reading*

(ME *rydding* ‘cleared land’) appear to be more specifically related to late-surviving woodland, while Stocking and Stubbing refer directly to stumps left when land was cleared.

Little Town in the Newlands valley, near Keswick, provides an example of field-names in an enclosed landscape of medieval colonisation (fig. 3). The name of the valley records its comparatively late colonisation: estate records show that active clearance and settlement were bringing new land into occupation there in the second half of the thirteenth century (Winchester 1987: 40, 70–71). The field-names recorded on the 1841 tithe plan are largely individual names (including multiple instances of the characteristic names *parrock* and *rudding*) but also some block names. Perhaps most striking is the block of fields called Thwaites in the centre of the hamlet’s lands, in which five of the eight holdings had shares in 1578. It is tempting to see this as an original communal clearing around which individual assarts were cleared and brought into use. Even in small hamlets such as this, field-naming patterns not infrequently hint at a certain amount of shared resource at an early date—small patches of arable land and meadow ground, shared peat moss, for example. The resulting pattern suggests dispersed cores of cultivation in a matrix of individual enclosed fields (Winchester 2017: 34–35).

The era of ‘intaking’, which took place in the Lake District valleys across the late-medieval and early modern centuries, from *c.*1450 to the eighteenth century, saw new fields tacked onto the medieval enclosures along the lower slopes of the fells. They ranged from small patches nibbled out of the edge of the common to larger blocks of enclosed pasture, providing valuable managed grazing close to the farmstead. Wasdale Head provides a good example (fig. 4). There, the core of farmland on the flat valley floor was hemmed in by steep, rough fellsides. A string of fields along the skirts of Yewbarrow probably represent intakes enclosed during the seventeenth or early eighteenth century. No intakes were mentioned when the valley was surveyed in 1578, whereas a manor court award of 1664 implies that active intaking was taking place then. The process was complete by 1795, when the names of the new fields were recorded; all bore *intack* names: Old Intack; Jenny Intack; Middle Intack; Breckony Intack; Far Intack; Great Intack; Little Intack; New Intack (divided into West New Intack and East New Intack).⁸

⁸ For Wasdale Head, see Winchester (2000: 167–71).

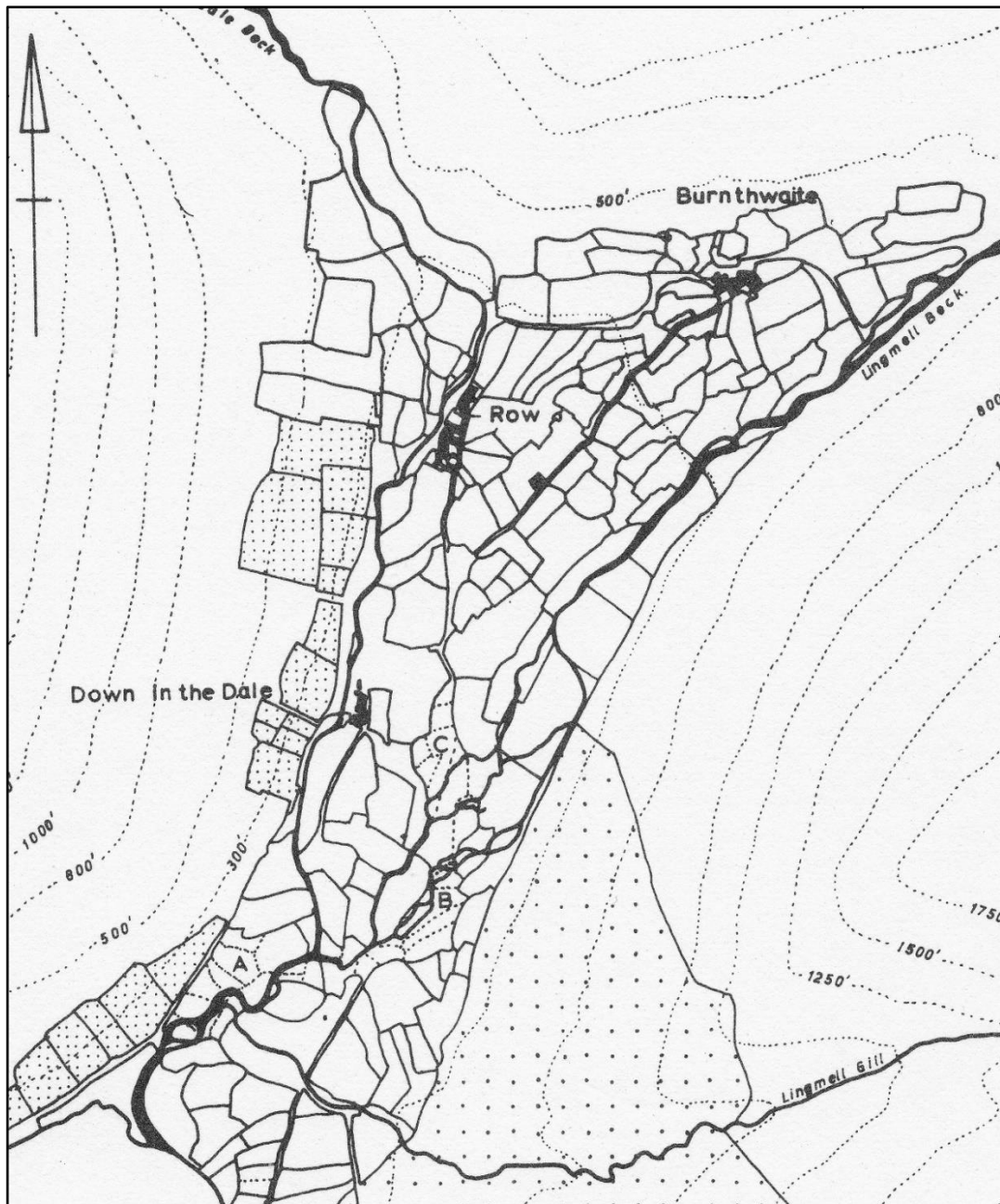


Figure 4. Wasdale Head (Cumbria). Fields on the slopes of Yewbarrow (left-hand side of map), named 'intack' in 1795, are closely stippled. The larger enclosure shown by open stipple was part of the 'new frith' or deer fence, enclosed in the sixteenth century. Source: Cockermouth Castle muniments, 'A Plan of Several Estates at Wasdale-head ... by I. Howard, Surr. 1795' (copy, 1862).

Seigniorial enclosures also generated distinctive naming patterns. Lordly parks were a feature of some daleheads, where a bowl of fellside pastures was retained in demesne, as at Troutbeck, Rydal and Kentmere, and they were also found elsewhere. Several Cumbrian parks had enclosures named *hay* (Latin *haia*; OE *haga*) attached to them, perhaps to

be interpreted as hunting enclosures wider than a deer park itself. Other seigniorial enclosures, tantamount to parks, were termed *frith* (OE *fyrhð(e)* ‘enclosed woodland’), such as the *newe frithe*, a walled enclosure for deer on the fellside at Wasdale Head, enclosed in the sixteenth century.⁹ One short-lived park on the edge of the Lake District, at Embleton, left a legacy in field-names recorded in the nineteenth century, long after it had been

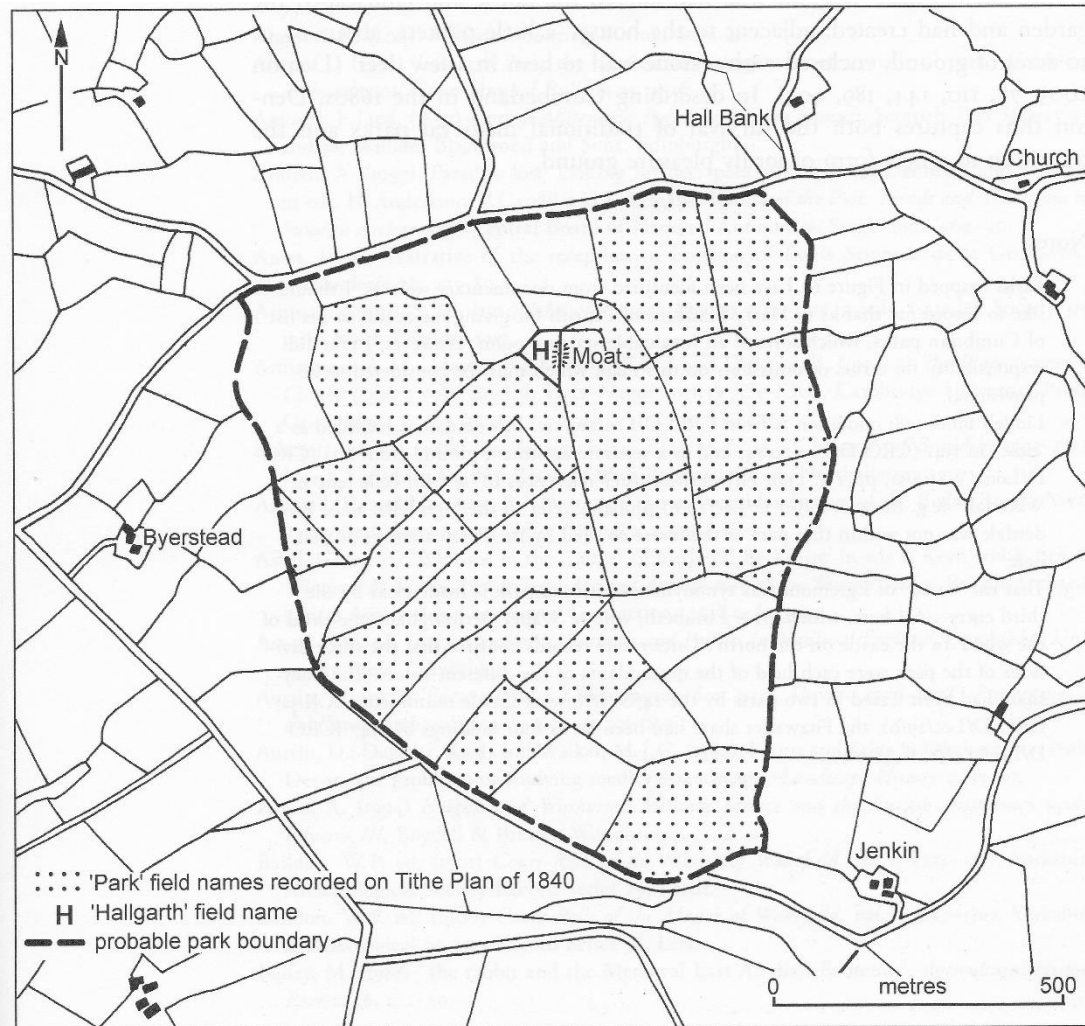


Figure 5. Embleton (Cumbria), *Park* field-names from the tithe plan of 1839 (CAS, DRC/8/70), indicating the extent of the medieval deer park.

disparked. Thomas de Ireby, the lord of Embleton, was granted a licence to enclose a park c.1285 but it seems unlikely that it survived the major destruction inflicted on Embleton during a Scottish raid in 1322. The park did not endure as a landscape feature into the post-medieval centuries but fields named *Park* on the tithe plan of 1839 continued to record its location and approximate extent. The small field named *Hallgarth* (fig. 5), beside

⁹ For *hay* and *frith*, see Winchester (2007: 171–73).

the earthworks of a moated site, records the site of the manor house (Winchester 2007: 182–83).

Minor names on the open fellsides

Finally, I'd like to consider briefly the minor names on the open commons of the fellsides. These are not field-names as such but their equivalent on common land, in that they are names recorded in early-modern sources, which are mostly missing from Ordnance Survey maps. The communal resources of the fells—grazing, peat for fuel, bracken, heather and so on—were integral to the traditional agrarian economy and thus complementary to the farmland of the valley floors. As a result, the open commons were worked on and walked over and were known in intimate detail by the farming community. Minor features on the open fellsides thus acquired names.

As an example of the loss of names on common land, we can compare the paucity of names on the modern Ordnance Survey map with the richness recorded in manorial records from Eskdale (figs 6 and 7) on the western side of the Lake District. A remarkably detailed award by the manor court of Eskdale in 1587, spelt out the management of grazing rights on the common and, in doing so, recorded numerous minor names on the fells. The document, known as the 'Eskdale Twenty-Four Book' was drawn up by the 24-man jury 'for the usage of the common within this lordship with the tenants' goods therein habiting'.¹⁰ It laid out the rules governing the three separate areas of the common recognised for different categories of livestock. Burn Moor, a saddle in the hills around Burnmoor Tarn, was a pasture for 'geld goods' (i.e. stock without young, such as heifers, bullocks, and horses). Then, each farm was allocated a cow pasture for its milk cows on the lower fellsides, and also a 'sheep drift' leading to its recognised grazing ground (or 'heaf') for its sheep flock on the higher fells.¹¹ In laying out these patterns of use, the 1587 award used a host of minor place-names, mostly now lost.

¹⁰ The whereabouts of the original award is not known but a copy dated 1692, entitled 'Commons cattle drift and heaf award of the twenty-four sworn men of Eskdale, Miterdale and Wasdale head' survives in Cockermouth Castle Muniments. Later copies include CAS, D/Ben/3/761 (made in 1795 from the 1692 copy, confirmed and added to by a jury in 1701) and YPR 4/18 (copied in 1840 into the Eskdale chapel-warden's account book).

¹¹ I attempted to reconstruct these patterns in Winchester (1987: 88–89); see also Winchester (2000: 110–11).



Figure 6. Eskdale Common (Cu). Extract from 1st edition OS Six-Inch map (Cumberland sheet 79), surveyed 1860–62, illustrating the paucity of place-names recorded on the fellsides.

Peelplace Noddle is near Stony Tarn (top right); the farm of Peelplace, bottom left. Reproduced under a CC-BY-NC-SA licence with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

Large expanses of the open hills are blank on the modern map but in Eskdale a few names do survive to record the linkage between individual farms and places used by them on the common fellsides. Peelplace Noddle and Dawsonground Crag are examples, linking rocky knolls on the fellside near Stony Tarn by name to farmsteads in the valley below (see fig. 6). The 1587 award immediately makes it clear that many more have

been lost. The ‘cow drifts’ (routes to the cow pastures on lower fellsides behind the farms) for Dawsonground and Peelplace laid out in 1587 were specified thus:

Dawson Place ... shall drive their kine up at Clattor Gapp and forth at the back of the Evillrake How and up under the oke at Browne how and up the foot of Minigate how and over the slacke in the Bleabeck Dubbs and so to let them go.

And for the cow drift of Peelplace, forth the Broadrake and up over the Fowle bridge and to the Highstone and turne them up on the south side of the said stone and up to the Broadmoss in their own grounde and let them go.

In each case, the route spelt out in such detail covered less than a kilometre from the farmstead onto the cow pasture on the open fell immediately behind. The 1587 award demonstrates the intensity of minor place-names, now lost, within that small section of the common. Places named on both routes contain the dialect term *rake*, a steep mountain path, used of livestock tracks on common land. The routes were defined by features in the landscape—a stone, a tree, hillocks (*hows*), a hollow (*slack*), pools (*dubbs*), a peat moss. Few of the names can now be located, even approximately, an exception being Bleabeck Dubbs, presumably somewhere on the stream flowing down from Stony Tarn.

Sometimes, however, it is possible to locate lost names with some confidence and thus to re-populate the fellsides with some of the places known to the early modern community which used the common. A particularly clear example is the name Swinside, which is referred to three times in the 1587 award and can be identified from adjacent places named in the award which do survive on the Ordnance Survey map (fig. 7).

The first of the three references to ‘Swinside’ is on the circuit of Burn Moor, the southern section of which ran from ‘the south side of Langrigg and away by the Great Stone in Swinside and streight over Whillon Gill’. That places it somewhere between Low Longrigg and Whillan Beck on the modern map (1 and 2 on fig. 7). Swinside also occurs in the descriptions of the sheep drifts allocated to two farms and can again be located by reference to identifiable places (numbered on Figure 7). That for Spout House ran ‘upon their accustomed waye upon the height of Brownband [3] and up over the How of Swinside and up at Eile Ark’ [4], an eel trap at the outflow of Burnmoor Tarn. The sheep of the hamlet of Boot were to go ‘forth of their banks up at Acrehows [5] and by the Broad thorn in Swinside

and over Eller Hows [6]'. By mapping the surviving place-names, Swinside can thus be located with some precision.

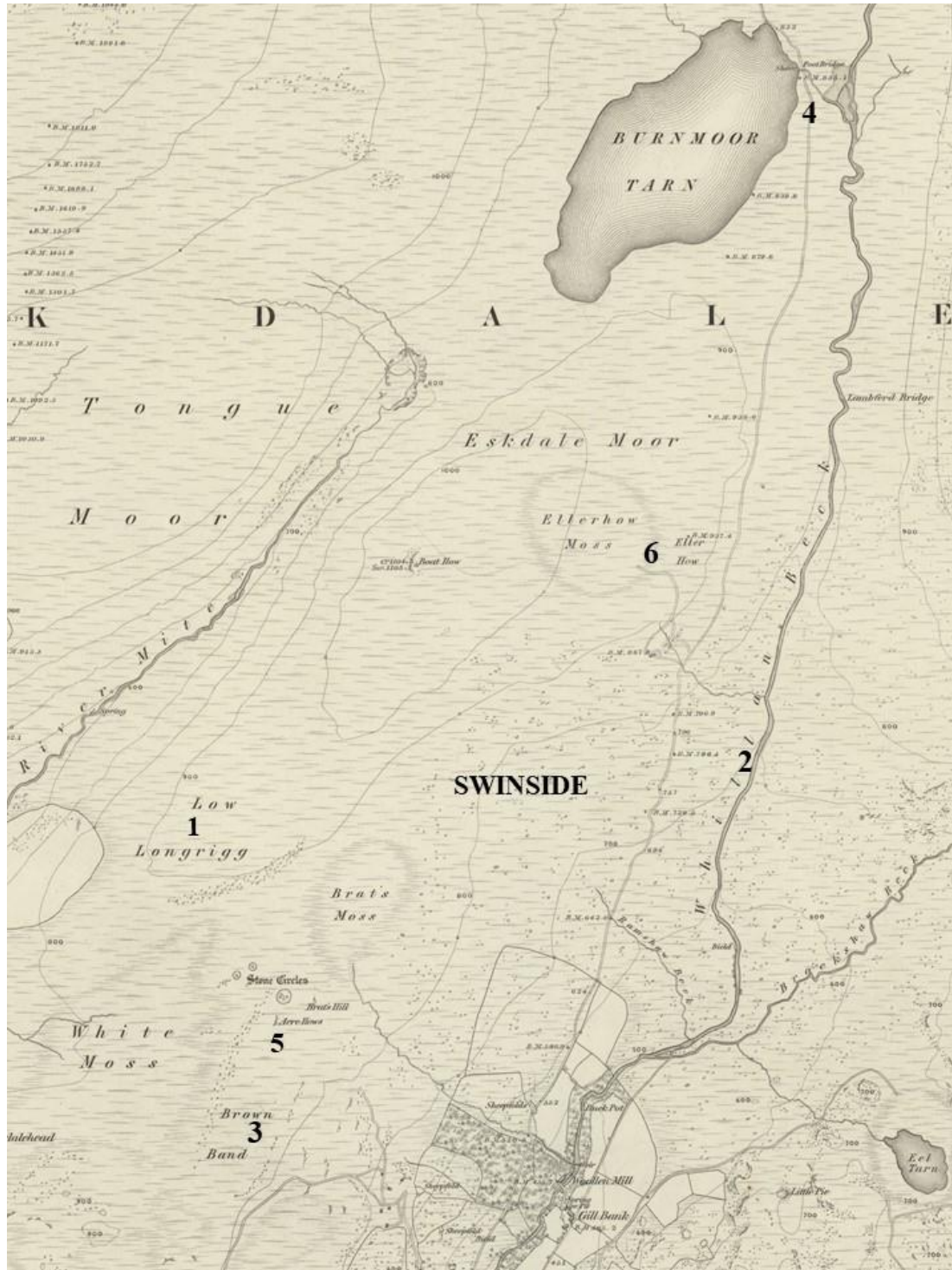


Figure 7. Identification of ‘Swinside’, Eskdale Common.

Places named in the 1587 award and identifiable on the OS map are numbered. Base map: OS Six-Inch map (Cumberland sheet 79), 1st edition, surveyed 1860–62. Reproduced under a CC-BY-NC-SA licence with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

This exercise adds another Swinside to the eight occurrences of the name in the Lake District which appear on the modern map (Whaley 2006: 333–34). Although most are recorded only from the sixteenth century, these are almost certainly a legacy of the medieval period (one instance is recorded in the thirteenth century). The name combines OE *swīn*/ ON *svín* ‘pig’ with a generic *side*, which may derive from more than one root: ON *saetr* ‘shieling’, or *side* ‘hill slope’ or OE *hēafod* ‘headland, high place’. Most Swinsides are on the lower fells on the edge of the Lake District or tucked away further up the valleys. They probably denote patches of late-surviving woodland where pigs grazed.

* * *

A landscape without names is an environment stripped of its human, cultural meaning. As the geographer Christopher Tilley memorably put it: ‘In a fundamental way names create landscapes. An unnamed place on a map is quite literally a blank space’ (1994: 18–19). In this lecture, I’ve been dealing with blank spaces on the modern map, places, whether individual fields or open commons, which in the past possessed a rich texture of very minor names, many of which can now only be recaptured from the historical record.

Alasdair Maclean, writing on Ardnamurchan in the Highlands, called the loss of such minor names ‘one of the most vital yet least considered areas of cultural erosion’. As an example, he told of a rock on the way to a peat moss, given a name recording its use as a resting place when crofters were returning home with heavy creels of peat. With the loss of its name, ‘you may say that the rock itself has been obliterated for it is no longer significantly there. ... Deprived of its human attachment it has become one more rock in an anonymously rocky landscape’ (Maclean 2001: 185). The names I have been talking about are the fruits of an intimate knowledge of the land by the farming community in the traditional (i.e. pre-tractor) age, the product of, and also often testimony to, physical labour on the land across the generations. They bring the rural landscape alive, particularly when studied in relation to the agrarian system and the ‘fieldsapes’ it generated.

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