

Low Furness: The Archaeology

Mesolithic – Bronze Age (c.8500 – 2750 years ago)

Archaeologists are not exactly spoilt for choice when it comes to trying to reconstruct what was going on in Low Furness in this period. Hard evidence seems (at first sight) to be limited to a range of small chipped flint flake tools from the Middle Stone Age (Mesolithic); a variety of New Stone Age (Neolithic) stone axes sourced from the central Lake District; and some burial and 'ritual' sites. The larger stone tools have chiefly been found through farmers and other agricultural labourers discovering them by chance over the last 150 years, although more recently archaeologists have excavated a valley site near Gleaston Mill and a cave near Scales village that will, when they are published, reveal more details of Mesolithic occupation. Birkrigg Common, a limestone plateau east of Great Urswick, holds traces of Neolithic/Bronze Age burial and 'ritual' sites, including a beautiful 27m diameter concentric stone circle known as The Druid's Temple (although no ancient Druids should be associated with it). Excavations here in 1911 and 1921 revealed that the inner core of the circle had been cobbled, and a small inverted cinerary urn only 15cm high had been included amongst several cremations in its interior. More recent finds from it made during illicit digging include a bronze artefact (please note that this site is a scheduled ancient monument, and it must not be disturbed!) A site marked on Ordnance Survey maps to the west of Great Urswick as a Burial Chamber appears in fact to be a natural feature. No archaeological finds have been reported from it.

Evidence from this period of a very different kind comes from pollen cores taken from locations such as the tarn at Great Urswick. These cores preserve pollen from ancient trees and plants. Upon detailed analysis they show, (often in minute detail) how the environment has changed since the last Ice Age. Variations in vegetation for the period from the Neolithic onwards, (such as 'clearance' of specific tree species like elm) are often ascribed to human interventions.

Iron Age – Roman (c.2750 – 1600 years ago)

Once we get to the Iron Age, we find dramatic new evidence for human settlement; particularly at a site known as Urswick Stone Walls (500m to the north-west of Little Urswick). Here are the remains of a specific form of large enclosed hamlet common in certain valleys in eastern Cumbria. Elsewhere sites like this form elements of complex later prehistoric estates, and it is known that Urswick Stone Walls is one of a number of such sites in Low Furness – but it's a shame that it is the only complete survivor. You can wander amongst the grass-grown banks and stones that define the yards and buildings here, and get fine views of the moors of upland Furness. Small-scale excavations here in April 1906 produced pottery fragments, metalworking slag, animal bones and teeth, and a fragment of decorated bronze. As with the Druid's Temple, the site is protected as an ancient monument of national significance, and it must not be disturbed.

The Roman period (c.43 – 410 AD) offers tantalising clues from a 'lost' Roman military site; clues which the Low Furness: First Light archaeological discovery programme will investigate in detail between 2003 and 2008. Current archaeological survey is revealing substantial quantities of distinctive Roman military-type masonry built into walls around Great Urswick. The only logical context for this is a fort, and close analysis of the documentary evidence relating to names of forts in this sector of the Roman Empire reveals a missing site in southern Cumbria known variously as Clanoventa, Cantiventi, Glannoventa and Glannibanta; which was occupied for part of its life by a military unit; Cohors I Morinorum. Despite this name having also been linked to other long-known Roman Cumbrian forts at Ravenglass and Ambleside, a strong case has recently been made for it applying to a site here in Low Furness. Iron ore, building and quern stones - all vital resources for the Romans - were all obtainable here in quantity, and Low Furness has long produced sporadic finds of Roman coins ranging from pre-invasion issues to those in circulation at the very end of the Empire. Will the First Light archaeological discovery programme rewrite the history books? Regular updates of this website will allow you to find out!

Early Historic (c.1600 – 950 years ago)

Regarded by some as the black hole of British history, the period between Roman abandonment and Norman elite invasion is surely the most fascinating of all. It is this period that saw the emergence of the national identities of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and the explosion of Christianity as a religion

that gave powerful expression, cohesion and purpose to those early nations. It also saw the creation of Cumbria, or, as it was then known – Rheged; as a distinctive, (if decidedly short-lived) kingdom in its own right. No other single period is so redolent with vital questions that we can ask of the past, so brilliant in the increasingly detailed, (yet surprisingly frustrating) responses to those queries from archaeology; and so rich with clues as to the truth of the history of these islands.

Here in Low Furness we may have one of the most significant sites to be recently identified from this period – that centred on the church at Great Urswick. The same archaeological investigations that produced the first finds of Roman masonry in 2002 also produced evidence for an extremely early, (sub-Roman) Christian community and a monastic church. Surviving through a combination of good fortune and the care of its community over many generations, the Church of SS Mary and Michael at Great Urswick contains both stone sculpture and building evidence from this period, with, in addition, a range of well-preserved landscape archaeological evidence to support the monastic theory. The full story is far too complex to reveal here; and we can only recommend that you visit the church to find out more! In 2004 a major exhibition will be unveiled in the church that features the potential of this important site.

For many people the true villains of this ‘dark’ age were the Vikings; and we are fortunate in Low Furness to have evidence for both warlike and peaceable Scandinavian activity. Whilst digging a grave in the churchyard at Rampside in 1909, the pommel, grip, guard and 40cm of the blade of a Viking sword were unearthed. Visitors to the churchyard today will see how windswept and (apparently) isolated this place is – yet with excellent views out over the coast of south-eastern Furness. This surely gives us the main reason why an important Viking was buried here over one thousand years ago.

The other evidence of Scandinavian presence comes – surprisingly – right at the very end of this period. In fact it may more correctly belong to the subsequent period of Norman church construction; but is included here for a specific reason. In 1902 an unusual semi-circular stone bearing a crude depiction of an angel and an inscription was found built into a farm outbuilding near Pennington. Its date is often given as 12th century due to Norman decorative features at its base, and it ended up over an outhouse door presumably because it was discarded during the ‘restoration’ of the nearby Church of St Michael and The Holy Angels in 1826. This stone turned out to be a tympanum; a specifically cut feature designed to fill the gap between the top of a church door and the arch above it. One reading of the Pennington tympanum inscription gives us; ‘KML : ET : ThES : KIRK : HUBIRT : MASUN : UAN : M’, i.e: ‘Gamal [] this church. Hubert the mason carved...’ (although some letters in the first and second words of the inscription have been lost, thus making these elements hard to read). We are drawn to this stone because its inscription is not quite in English, but a mixture of English and Old Norse runes. It shows that the Old Norse language had threaded into Old or Middle English in this beautiful rural parish where Low Furness runs into the moors of its counterpart; although scholarly opinion is divided over which was the more influential language, or which the more corrupt in its inscribed form. The Vikings had a lasting influence way beyond the stereotype of their seafaring, trading and raiding days.

Middle Ages (c.950 – 500 years ago)

The Norman invasion of 1066 and subsequent developments resulted in dramatic building activity; expressed in this area most vividly in the remains of the Abbey of St Mary near Barrow in Furness, and the ruins of Piel Castle on its island near Rampside. Low Furness reveals another side to this more flamboyant evidence for Norman and feudal ambition. As with the Urswick story, this hidden narrative leads us to archaeological evidence that makes us think about the origins of key features in the landscape. On a lonely headland just over a kilometre south-west of Aldingham are the magnificently sited remnants of a Norman motte and bailey castle; so-called because of a large earthen mound (the motte) which originally supported a timber tower, originally linked by a timber bridge to an enclosure (the bailey). Yet appearances can be deceptive; and excavations here in 1968 revealed that the earliest phase of the site was an earthen ringwork, (a ring mound originally topped with a timber palisade) similar to the remains perched above a ravine some 500m north-west of the church at Pennington. The origins and dates of these earlier ringworks are unknown.

Buried in the hills two kilometres to the west of Aldingham are the gaunt ivy-clad remnants of Gleaston Castle – a rare 14th century oddity; never completed, and out of date even as it was being (inadequately) constructed. The owners of Gleaston Mill just to the south have supported a number of archaeological investigations in the 1990s; giving new clues as to the origins of the mill, (and going much further back in time, as was mentioned earlier). Yet one of the hidden gems of the area is in Aldingham itself; the Church

of St Cuthbert, with a much-eroded pre-Norman cross shaft element built into the chancel, and grey cement rendering disguising a complex medieval and post-medieval building (though it is unable to hide the massive 14th century tower; similar in many respects to that at Great Urswick).

More subtle archaeological evidence for the way that ordinary folk lived and worked in this period comes from just south-west of Little Urswick, where the traces of houses and a street of a medieval village appear in the fields.