

“Ancient Ways to the Great Langdale Axe Factories”

On Tuesday 14 February 35 members of the Appleby Archaeology Group welcomed Mr Gabriel Blamires, an independent antiquarian and historian living in Cumbria for the last 30 years, to describe the latest findings of his research into possible routeways to and from the famous Neolithic stone axe working sites in the Great Langdale area of the Lake District.

Archaeologists such as Clare Fell and Plint had in the past identified various megaliths or large blocks of stone as likely waymarkers along inferred routes from known production sites of rough stone axes on Scafell Pike and the Langdale Pikes to the coastal and lowland processing sites where these ‘roughs’ were polished into the finished article. Evidence of polishing near sources of sandstone have been found in several sites around the periphery of the Lake District, on the Cumbrian coast and near Penrith and Keswick. Comparing the locations of these sites with a distribution map of polished axe finds throughout the UK has allowed Gabriel to postulate an extended network of paths radiating outwards from Great Langdale Valley, and to locate and document along these routes many more large blocks of stone than have previously been recognised. These he interprets as distinctively shaped and strategically placed megaliths which he believes were used as guidestones by people seeking and transporting stone axes for destinations concentrated in southern Scotland, Northumbria, North and East Yorkshire, the Trent Valley and the Thames Valley, as well as continental Europe. Stone axes were produced for 1200 years, between 3800 and 2600BC, and it is thought that their distribution may relate to rock art sites and early stone circles in and around the Lake District.

The large body of Gabriel’s accumulating evidence was supported by his stunning photography along the hypothetical access routes, which follow the natural geography along but usually above the valley floor, occasionally crossing over passes. The megaliths occur where frost-shatter or glacial debris are possible origins, but their distinctive shapes (triangle, lozenge, pentagon, longstone) echo common megalith shapes seen in stone circles; and their distinctive locations seem deliberately selected to be memorable. They may reflect crude splitting of rocks to create directional shapes, separated and manipulated into position, if not brought from elsewhere, supporting their interpretation as waymarkers, and justifying their description as signposts. However, while it is not yet known exactly how far they owe their present shapes and dispositions to the activities of man, the audience warmly applauded the presentation of this innovative research, after which Gabriel agreed to answer questions.

The next talk will be on Tuesday 13th March in the Supper Room when Dr Ken Fairless and Jeff Lynn will talk about the Northumberland and Durham Art Project.