

Report March 2015

Harry Hawkins, a local historian and a member of Appleby Archaeology Group, entertained and informed a full house at their March meeting with a beautifully illustrated presentation entitled "Medieval Deer Parks of Cumbria, A story of deer, hunting, food, status, and pleasure".

Red and roe deer are native to Britain and it was the Normans who introduced fallow deer. Other breeds such as sika and muntjac were introduced later primarily to enhance the parklands.

Before the Norman invasion hunting of all animals was open to all but after the conquest the Norman kings claimed all deer and all wild animals as their property and controlled their hunting by licences and grants to nobles and prelates. The chase of the hunt was most important at this stage as the deer were chased to exhaustion by dogs and it became a highly ritualised and elaborate event for the ruling classes. Harry showed a number of slides of paintings and engravings to illustrate this.

Evidence of deer hunting can be seen in the cave paintings from Lascaux France (15,000BC). Carvings from Ninevah 645BC show deer being driven into a net. In the middle ages illustrations of deer, pursued by dogs, are seen on floor tiles from France and in an illustration from the Lanercost Cartulary. Statues of the Greek and Roman Goddesses of hunting include deer.

The Norman kings regarded all wild animals as their property and reserved large areas of England as Royal Forests subject to Forest Law. The forests included settlements, open countryside as well as woodland and they were at their peak in the 13th and 14th centuries. Granting of licences to barons and prelates to enclose land and form deer parks provided income for the crown.

Live deer were highly valued as gifts particularly as royal gifts and were transported considerable distances. Venison was highly valued and was reserved for special guests. The records of the analysis of animal remains indicate that consumption of deer increased in the 11th and 12th centuries and that venison was a high status food. Records show that Inglewood Forest supplied huge quantities to royal larders in the south, 100 -200 stags annually between July 1234 and 1251. The management of the forests was governed by charters and four clauses in Magna Carta refer to them.

There were baronial deer parks across Cumbria including parks at Greystoke, Cockermouth, Kendal, Millom and Flakebridge, Appleby. Evidence of these can be found in documents eg. records of granting licences and early maps and on the ground. Traces of boundaries often as earth banks which would have carried wooden fences or pales can be seen for example at Lowther and Brough and at Ravenstonedale where there are stretches of drystone wall 3-4 metres high. Place names may provide a clue as at Hartley Park, Kirby Stephen where the

field names include Upper Park, Lower Park and East Park. The audience was intrigued by a modern map of Regents Park London and one of Regents Deer Park where the boundaries were virtually the same. To ensure that the deer stayed within the park ditches were dug on the inside and deer leaps were constructed on the boundaries to enable deer to get in to the park but not able to get out . Traces of these may be seen as well as evidence of the keepers' cottages.

By the reign of Edward III the forest system had fallen into disuse. Many parks only held managed deer for a relatively short time and restocking became more difficult as wild deer numbers declined. The parks were often sub-divided for different uses such as pasture and beasts and in the later Medieval Period they were used for horses.

A number of medieval parks survived and were recreated as landscape parks in the Renaissance and Romantic Period. At Kendal Castle windows were placed so that guests would look out over the extent of the park which was abandoned in 1586. Appleby Castle had a small pleasure park around the castle. In the 18th and 19th century parks were again symbols of status and designed to impress. Deer were put into the parks to create a romantic scene, to be part of the view, and their meat was a by-product of the design landscape rather than a reason for it. At Lowther there are the remnant of several landscape features, a shooting wall, a possible folly and a building where picnics could be enjoyed. The 18th and 19th centuries also saw the creation of parks around quite modest country houses as the merchant classes increased their wealth and sought to impress their neighbours with a landed estate.

Harry concluded his informative talk by saying that two of Cumbria's medieval deer parks survive with deer, red deer at Lowther and black and fallow at Levens

