

Lime Burning and Lime Kilns in Westmorland

Dr David Johnson presented an illustrated talk to a full house of Appleby Archaeology Group members, and several interested visitors, on Tuesday evening. Dr Johnson is a member of Ingleton Archaeology Group and has in the past been awarded the Highly Commended "Community Archaeologist of the Year". He has many articles and publications to his name and his passion for the subject of the evening was very evident throughout. He began his research into lime burning and lime kilns over 20 years ago and has so far examined more than 3000 sites throughout the Yorkshire Dales, the National Park and Cumbria.

He began by outlining his research methods which include field surveying, archival and documentary accounts and hands-on archaeological excavations. He revealed to the audience the wealth of information which can be found in old records (some very ancient indeed), monastic accounts, enclosure awards, farm accounts, estate records, pictures and old maps. He also described how he once found the remains of a splendid mid-17th century kiln, known as a sow kiln, after following his gut instincts that a curved, saucer-like feature on the ground was something special – despite a surveyor having told him there absolutely "nothing there" – photos of his excavated find revealed a fine example of this type of kiln – it was "most certainly there"!

Dr Johnson continued his informative talk by providing a comprehensive overview of the many uses of lime in everyday life and in farming, rural trades and building. He described an early practice called "Needfire" (which is peculiar to the Craven district and Westmorland) in which cattle were led to walk through the fumes of burning lime to which had been added herbs and garlic as this was believed to stop diseases in animals. In the 1700s in Westmorland a farmer apparently also persuaded his wife to do the same to cure her bad chest!

He showed the audience some examples of old land-sales notices where the presence of a lime kiln was highlighted and brought to the attention of any prospective buyers. In the 16th and 17th centuries Westmorland tax assessments rated the area as "poor and remote" so the ability to improve the acidic soil with lime would become a big consideration in any land purchase. In the late 18th century almost 80% of Westmorland was still rated as "waste" (unimproved) but fortunately several things began to have an effect on bringing about a change – "The Improvers", Parliamentary Enclosure Acts, early Board of Agriculture, and landowners who impressed upon their tenant farmers the need to use lime to produce high quality crops and to produce what Webster in the late 1800s called "a fine sweet herbage".

He explained that nearly all kilns, whatever shape and size, were built into the hillside and all worked in the same way reaching a heat of about 800 degrees Celsius in the centre, and about 60 degrees Celsius at the bottom. He then produced an original 1950s limeburner's shovel which had been used to get the lime from the bottom of the kiln – it was a substantial tool and definitely not for the fainthearted.

Dr Johnson ended his talk with some facts and figures about kilns in the Westmorland Barony – sadly many of the kiln sites he has researched are in a state of some disrepair whilst almost a quarter of them have disappeared without trace, but ended with photos of some excellent examples of kilns which are well preserved and are a fine testament to the heritage of this activity in Cumbria.

He was warmly applauded and thanked for a most interesting and thoroughly well-researched and documented talk.

Carol Dougherty