

“Frightful” Cumbria

In 1724, Daniel Defoe wrote that mountainous Westmorland was, in his opinion, “the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England, or even Wales itself; the west side, which borders on Cumberland, is indeed bounded by a chain of almost unpassable mountains which, in the language of the country, are called fells.

In her lecture to Appleby Archaeology Group on 13th October on the subject of “Mapping the Medieval Landscape of Cumbria”, Dr Caron Newman, a Research Associate at Newcastle University, explained how her study of settlement patterns in Cumbria had led her to the view that Cumbria in 1724, while certainly wild, was perhaps not quite as uncivilised as Defoe had led us to believe.

Dr Newman said that she been able to start her work by using late 18th and 19th century County maps to establish a digital survey that recorded the extent of cultivation across the whole of Cumbria. Enclosure and Estate maps had been then employed to flesh out the details of the survey. Dr Newman explained that this had enabled her to calculate that in Defoe’s time only about half of Cumbria would have been unenclosed land. This compares with a figure of perhaps one third in modern times.

Dr Newman explained that the task she had then set herself had been to project her survey back in time to enable her to infer patterns of land use in the Medieval period, this being her particular interest. This objective had been achieved through the use of even earlier documents such as maps of the Cumbrian “Forests” (of which there were no less than 27, the largest being the Royal Forest of Inglewood), monastic holdings, place-names and site visits.

The presence of a “Forest” did not imply that the land would have been wooded - landlords were always keen to raise income as well as to indulge their hunting pleasures. Medieval estates would have contained a mix of dispersed settlement and enclosures with small common arable fields, sheep and cattle ranches (vaccaries) and industrial activities such as coppicing, mining and smelting all set alongside the wooded deer parks.

Broadly Dr Newman concluded that the medieval landscape was dominated by unenclosed land, the majority of which was common waste, and much of which was managed as forest or chase. There would have been many large areas of common waste made up of low moorland, mosses and poor soils. Examples were the Lazonby Ridge between the Lake District and the Pennines, and Anthorn Moss and Wedholme Flow on the Solway Plain. Overall it was certainly an emptier and more varied landscape than in present times, but probably not one that we would have considered “frightful”.

Recent work by Dr Newman and colleagues in the Bewcastle area has demonstrated that, where documentary evidence is slight, archaeological techniques may reveal vastly more information in the form of ancient field boundaries and settlement sites.

“Mapping the medieval landscape” is thus very much “a work in progress”.

Dr Newman was thanked for her informative and extremely well-illustrated talk. The next meeting of Appleby archaeology will be held on Thursday 10th November in the Supper Room of the Appleby Market Hall when Marta Alberti of the Vindolanda Trust will be talking about “Recent excavations at Vindolanda”