



Between the Lines

Land of Oak & Iron Mapping Project Newsletter

February 2021

The Government "roadmap" for reducing restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic will mean that our current way of meeting will continue into the summer months. Virtual meetings, of the type we use now, may well become a useful feature to include in how we operate in the future. Now would be a good time to get involved. This month we turn our attentions to the villages of the Upper Derwent Valley in our "Spotlight" article. There is a lot to explore and links to principal reference materials are included to give a start for further research.

Mapping meetings

Meetings continue to be held using the MS Teams or Zoom platforms. The Coal Industries team, in particular, would be very happy for additional volunteers to drop-in (see below), see what they are doing and hopefully join them in researching the topic.

It is too early at present to make any plans for physical meetings where we can get together to discuss topics and look at maps. Now would be a great time to embrace the "new technology" of virtual meetings, if you have not already done so, as they will provide a complementary forum to the physical meetings, for sharing information, as we move forward. If you have any questions about virtual meeting please get [in touch](#).

To be able to access any of the MS Teams groups please ensure that you have completed and returned the LOIT volunteer application form, which you will find [here](#), and [e-mail it back to us](#) if you have not already done so. If you previously completed a form when you joined the Mapping Group we must ask you to complete a further form to become an LOIT volunteer. The original registration was for the, now dissolved, Land of Oak & Iron Partnership operated by Groundwork. Unfortunately due to GDPR legislation this cannot be transferred to LOIT.

Spotlight on the Pennine Villages of the Upper Derwent Valley

To the casual visitor passing through the villages of the Upper Derwent Valley today it may well seem that these often quaint and pretty villages are the product of centuries of blissfully unchanging rural activity. Tourism is clearly on the modern agenda and complements the traditional pastoral farming, evidenced by the large number of animals that can be seen grazing in the fields. On venturing further, beyond the villages and into the upland moors, the occasional derelict stone building may pique the the visitor's interest in what was here in earlier times. Only when one starts to look at details on a map might the history of the area start to emerge. Looking at 19th century OS maps of the area which show features such as the numerous "Old Shaft", "Old Reservoir" and "Shake Hole" dotted around a "..... Lead Mine (disused)". Clearly there is a story of

industrial history to explore here, however, before we get drawn too far into that topic let's take a look at earlier times.

The villages of Blanchland, Edmundbyres and Muggleswick, along with their satellite hamlets, sit within the boundary of the North Pennines Area of Natural Outstanding Beauty (ANOB). For us, more significantly, they are in the River Derwent catchment area and, whilst not included in the original scope of the Land of Oak & Iron, have been recognised by the Trust to be as much a part of the history and development of the area as those settlements further downstream.

The earliest recorded evidence of human activity in the area dates back to the Mesolithic period (8,000 to 4,000 BC) with fragments of tools found during archaeological excavations on Birkside Fell (NGR: NY940515), 2 miles north-west of Blanchland. It is thought that these were left from the cyclical seasonal visits to the area by the nomadic peoples of that time rather than associated with a permanent settlement. Dating from around 3,000 years later, a burial urn in a ring cairn was also found on Birkside Fell. Whether settlements existed on the Fell from that period can only be speculated upon: further archaeological investigation may find the evidence required to draw any conclusion.

Near Peadam's Oak (NGR: NY987483), in the Burnhope Burn valley, south-west of Edmundbyres, evidence of "scooped roundhouse platforms" has been reported. Detailed investigation to confirm that these are correctly identified and that a potential Mid-Bronze age (1,500 - 800BC) settlement existed on the site remains to be carried out. A derelict Grade II listed farmhouse (HER 1279147) now stands at Peadam's Oak.

A little further north of Birkside Fell, on Burntshieldhaugh Fell, three pre-historic settlements, dating from (800BC to 100AD) have been found on the east bank of the Devil's Water. These sites comprise one or more round houses with field systems from the same period. Evidence of an extensive area of medieval rigg (ridge) and furrow cultivation to the east of Edmundbyres, clearly visible in LIDAR scans, indicate that a late

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prehistoric settlement is likely to have existed nearby although its location is yet to be found.

Whilst the presence of Romans to the north of the Land of Oak & Iron is well known, there appears to be no evidence of them being active in the Upper Derwent Valley. Many miles to the west, Epiacum Fort near Alston, has been well documented. Much of the route of Dere Street, which passes through Ebchester, and runs a few miles north-east of the area, is still used today. In Weardale, to the south of the Derwent Valley, several Roman artifacts have been found. On Bollihope Common, to the south of Stanhope, a Roman Altar stone has been discovered and a road, questionably of Roman origin, has been identified.

Other developments in the Upper Derwent Valley prior to the 12th century, when we can pick up the story again, remain a mystery.

Blanchland, Edmundbyres, Muggleswick (Mucylngeswyk) and Hunstanworth all receive mention in the Boldon Book of 1183.

It is believed the Church of St. Edmund (HER1229331), in Edmundbyres, was established in 1150. In 1165 Blanchland Premonstratensian Abbey (HER1017683) was founded and it survives as one of the most complete examples of its type. The modern village sits on the plan of the old abbey precinct, with the monastic church now used as the parish church; the outer court with villagers cottages, the village square; the abbey guest house, later the manor house and now the Lord Crewe Arms with the cloisters forming the garden. In the early 18th Century the house would find repute for its part in the Jacobite uprising.

Muggleswick Park (Grid ref: NZ036499), where the Bishop of Durham retained hunting rights, was enclosed as a deer park in the mid-13th century. Agriculture in the surrounding area, largely under the control of the Prior of Durham, was extensive and several buildings were established.

The earliest references to industrial development date from 1468 when King Edward IV gave control of gold and silver (including lead) mines to a group of nobles. In 1475 reference to mining at "Shylden" (Shildon) is mentioned, although the exact location is not known. It is thought that Blanchland Abbey may have had a silver refinery (silver often being found with lead) as early as 1228.

Lead mining became the predominant industry from the early 17th Century. Near Blanchland the sites of eight mines have been identified. Four of these; Whiteheaps, Sikehead, Ramshaw and Presser; extend along the east side of Bolt's Burn, south-west of the village (Grid Ref: NY951474). Sandyford Mine is a little further east on the other side of Allenshields & Buckshott Moor (Grid ref: NY970470). The ample supplies of water and inclined land meant that hydraulic power remained in use as a source of powering machinery long after it had been replaced by steam in other industries. The Sikehead Dams are part of the site of the water management system used and

form part of the designated Scheduled Monument (HER1015862, NGR: NY957467) along with the the remains of flues, rodways and the site of Jeffrey's Smelt mill.

To the west of Blanchland, Beldon Shield Mine (NGR: NY929495) sits on the banks of Beldon Burn, and to the north-east of here are the mineworkings of Reeding Mine adjacent to Reeding Burn (NGR: NY946505). Along the banks of Shildon Burn, to the north of Blanchland, (NGR: NY960510) were located several sites associated with Shildon Mine.

Running along the lowlands on the edge of the Fells to the north are tracks linking Shildon and Winnowshill Common (NGR: NY982532). Acton High and Acton Low mills, which were located here, can be found on the 1898 OS map of the area. Further upstream on Acton Cleugh are shown various coal workings which may explain why this location, somewhat remote from the mine, was used.

A mile or so to the south-west of Edmundbyres, to either side of the B6278, are the sites of Harehope, Burnhope and Swandale mines (NGR: NZ007487) along with Feldon Smelt mill (NGR: NZ000485) a little further to the west.

To the east of Muggleswick, in the crook formed by Derwent Gorge (NGR: NZ054490), the sites of Silvertongue Lead mine and mill can be found. The Gorge and surrounding woodlands are designated National Nature Reserve (NNR) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

On the 1896 OS 25inch to the mile map of the Healeyfield area, to the west of Castleside, there are a number of features marked as "Old Shaft (Lead)" (NGR: NZ077484). Known as the Healeyfield Mine, the operations were centred around Denehowl. A smelting mill was located just over a mile away to the east (NGR: NZ079484), south of Castleside.

Whilst much of the lead industry had finished by the end of the 19th Century, mining of fluorspar continued at Whiteheaps Mine until its closure in 1986.

Today, probably the best known feature of the area is the Derwent Reservoir. Opened in 1967, it provides water for much of the Tyne and Wear area. Below the waves, frequented by yachts in summer months, lie the remains of the village of Espershields.

As we can see, far from being a simple picture of an unchanging agricultural landscape, the Upper Derwent Valley has seen a significant ecclesiastical presence, the rise and fall of a substantial mining industry, and is now recognised as a location for leisure. Many of interesting topics, touched on only briefly here, warrant further investigation by the mapping group.

Main reference materials:

Frodsham, P. 2019. North Pennines Archaeological Research Framework. Part: 1 Resource Assessment (January 2019), published by Altogether Archaeology. (link to [PDF](#)).

W.J. Prit and J.M. Dodds, 2002, Lead Mining in the Derwent Valley, British Mining No. 70, Published by Northern Mining Research Society (link to [PDF](#)).

Historic Environment Record (HER) entries as noted in text.



LOTTERY FUNDED

Coming up:

Physical meetings are suspended until further notice.

Get in touch with us at volunteering@loit.org.uk if you would like to join us in a virtual meeting.