

Little Asby Common and Sunbiggin Tarn : summary history

Little Asby village

Originally, Little Asby formed part of a single manor called Asby, later split into Great and Little Asby parishes with settlements, and formed three manors – Asby Winderswath, Asby Coatesford and Little Asby in the east ward of the Barony of Westmorland. Little Asby was also known as Old Askeby, indicating that it had an older history than Great Asby. This division into three manors had taken place by the time that the manorial estate of Little Asby was first mentioned in the reign of Henry II when Little Asby was owned by Richard L'Engleys.

The families of L'Engleys, Askebys and Coatsfords (the latter owned the other two manors) gave land from their manors to the monastic orders in the 1100s and 1200s. They gifted land for granges, stock holding and the rights of grazing of the commons to the monastic orders of the Hospitals of St Peter and St Leonard at York and to Byland Abbey. There were four granges within the parishes of Asby at what are now Asby Hall, Grange Hall, Asby Grange and Gaythorne Hall.

The layout of the village of Little Asby is typical of a small nucleated settlement, which has a deliberately expanded main street, and a well defined funnelled outgang feeding out to the Common. Lowland enclosed fields surround the village on all but the south side and show some evidence of relict strip field cultivation.

The village lies immediately adjacent to the common land, which was just beyond the good arable and outfield land. The establishment of common land developed from the so called waste, for the most part in the high medieval period, when they were appropriated into the manors – the principle was formalized in the statute of Merton in 1235 which confirmed the rights of the lord of the manor over the manor's waste, upon which the tenants of the manor could exercise common rights. These rights were reserved specifically for the manor, hence they could not be used by individuals from outside the manor and the produce could not be sold outside the manor. It is probable that the commons were exploited throughout the medieval period and into the post medieval period in an evolving upland pastoral economy. The commons would have been chiefly exploited for the grazing of animals, but also for construction materials in the form of turf, wood and stone, and on some commons but not Little Asby, for fuel. They may have been used for seasonal transhumance where livestock was taken onto the higher ground for grazing, with the herdsmen using temporary shielings, whilst the fields around the village were put into crop. There is no evidence of shielings on the Common.

Asby parish had a population of 215 in 1641, rising to 421 by 1829. Entries in local directories show the population of Little Asby consisted solely of farmers, whilst the specialist tradesmen lived in Great Asby. The Little Asby area reflects an essentially agricultural landscape which has seen only very limited industrial activity. However, there is evidence of small scale lime burning and associated quarrying.

Place names

Many of the place names on or adjacent to the Common incorporate elements of words of old English or Norse derivation. Neither Little Asby, Great Asby or Sunbiggin appear in the Domesday Book as the survey did not cover this part of Westmorland. The first reference to the name of Asby is in a Musgrave manorial deed of c1150 as *Askebi*. The first mention of Little Asby as a separate manor is as *parvo askebi* in a Lowther Manorial deed of 1185. It evolved to become *Little Assby* in 1711. The name derives from the Old Scandinavian *askr* and *by*, meaning the farmstead or village where the ash trees grow. The name may indicate that there was some form of dispersed pre-Norman settlement within what was to become the parish of Asby, but not necessarily at Little Asby itself.



Sunbiggin Tarn la/tarns & dubs/Sunbiggin 21.3.03

Sunbiggin derives from the old English *sunne*, meaning sun, or the old Scandinavian *sun*, meaning sunny or south building, the building on the south or sunny side of the hill.

The 'Asket' element of Asket Dub (adjacent to the road near the Little Asby cattlegrid) appears as *Assetgate* in 1294. This has two elements – *asse-* either meaning ash or being an elliptical form of Asby, and *-gate* or *gata*, being old Scandinavian for path. *Assetgate* therefore most likely means the road to Asby, with Asket Dub being a pond on this road, or the pool by the ash tree.



Asket Dub la/tarns& dubs/asket dub/1 nov 06

Maizongill (southern extent of the Common) probably related to what is now Potts Beck, and was probably the ravine near the head of Potts Beck. Maizon Wath occurs in the Asby Parish registers from 1657 and may have some connection with the Mason or Mayson family, a local surname from at least the seventeenth century. Maizon Wath means the ford where the titmice congregate – the ford crossed Potts Beck.



Potts Beck la/general/ pots valley 4, 18.8.05

Aamaside : The hillside where the hermit lives (just outside the southeastern boundary of the Common in Potts Valley)

Bield : A shelter or an animal's den. There are at least 15 names on the scar.



Bield no 32 in the archaeology report [la//bields/32/before repair/3.3.05](#) 15

Burtree (property to the north east of the Common): An elder tree.

Cowdale Slack (north western area of the Common) : A damp hollow where cows graze.

Howes Well (south western part of the Common, below the road): The spring belongs to the local family of Howe, 1665.

Lousy Brow : A useless (lousy) hillside.

Mitchell's Stone : Probably 'the large rock'; perhaps a boundary marker. Located on the western boundary.



Mitchell's Stone [la/general/mitchell's stone 1 nov 06](#)

Muddygill (North Western part of the Common) : A muddy ravine.

Seavy Dub (near the western boundary of the Common) : A pool among the sedge or rushes. The rushes were harvested in the autumn to make rushlights, the main source of light indoors until the mid 19th century.



Seavy Dub la/tarns&dubs/seavy dub/1 nov 06

Spear Pots (to the north of the road just after Sunbiggin Tarn): A difficult name with no early forms as a guide. Pot clearly means a pit, hole or deep depression, perhaps with water but 'spear' has no obvious derivation here. One possibility is from 'sphere', spearwort, the buttercup like plant of damp places, notable for poisoning cattle; 'spaer' – gypsum; 'spear-hafoc' – sparrow hawk.



Spear Pots la/tarns&dubs/spear pots/1.11.06

Dowly Tree (adjacent to the road just after the T junction on the way to Little Asby village) – Dowly is Westmorland dialect for sad, lonely, melancholy and it appears therefore that this is the lonely tree. Some local people think the tree is associated with a local hangman's site whilst books on the area apparently refer to the site being haunted from a murdered drover. No one therefore appears to know exactly what the significance or meaning of the Dowly Tree is, but some interpretations include :-

Dowly : adj – not very well, “Ahs feelen a bit dowly this morning. Worse than middlin”. (Lakeland Dialect Society)

Dowly : adj : sorrowful, dull, low spirited, melancholy, gloomy, poorly, depressing. This expressive and much used word is applied to persons, things, places and conditions in any of the above senses. (Yorkshire Folk Talk)



la/dowly tree/1.11.06

Dowly : off colour. (Gazette and Herald)

Dowly : dreary, damp weather. Usage : it's a dowly day. (Guide to Hull dialect)

Legends and stories

Skeletons have been found of two fighting bulls who had drowned in their battle at the eastern end of Sunbiggin Tarn.

Most murders, ghosts and other apparitions seem to have occurred on the fringes of FLD land. However, there is reference to the murder of a drover “near Sunbiggin Tarn” in 1877 (T.Gibson – Legends and Historical Notes).

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Archaeological history of Little Asby Common

Summary

Little Asby Common has a wealth of archaeological remains of all periods, demonstrating the continued use of this upland area from prehistoric times onwards. There is a significant resource of prehistoric archaeological sites, ranging from lithic findspots that date back to the Mesolithic period, to a small cairnfield and associated field system, which includes a putative Bronze Age round cairn. Scattered across the area are small field systems and stock pounds associated with rectilinear settlements; these typically take advantage of sheltered grassy areas amongst the limestone pavement. It is possible that these reflect a low intensity occupation of the marginal lands, probably during the medieval period, and for the most part were a product of transhumant practice (shielings). However, in some localised areas there is the possibility that there were more permanently established settlement. There are also extensive scattered pastoral structures, such as bields and isolated stock pounds; these stock management features appear to be the product of mainly post medieval upland grazing. The Common has extensive post medieval extractive sites, associated with a group of limekilns and the development of Little Asby. There is also evidence of small scale copper extraction and processing from one site on the south eastern area of the common.

The remains reflect a remarkable survival of archaeological landscapes on the upland fringes of the Eden Valley, and are of considerable importance.

FLD commissioned an archaeology study of the whole Common in 2004. The archaeology study recorded 194 sites either on or adjacent to the Common, 90 of these were new sites – they had never been previously recorded. The majority of sites fall within discrete categories :

Funerary cairns – of which there are three, all within one section of the Common.

Clearance cairns : these appear to form a distinct area of clearance on two grassy areas located between outcropping limestone bands. They seem to be related to two roughly parallel irregular stone banks.



Kerbed cairn, archaeology report site 78 la/cairns/kerbed cairn 1.11.06

Shielings, stock enclosures and field systems : The most impressive features to be recorded are elements of an extensive relict agricultural landscape. These features are difficult to date but include rectilinear structures, field systems demarcating land between bands of limestone pavement and stock enclosures. The settlements were almost certainly seasonal (shielings). On Little Asby Scar, the most extensive feature is the large sub rectangular stock enclosure, with a possible house and enclosed boundary bank that encloses much of the south side of the scar.

Bields, sheepfolds, shepherds huts and marker cairns : The majority of bields are in disrepair. There are a number of shelters which have exploited the limestone pavement, e.g. pavement has been quarried to form a vertical edge and this has been used as one side of the structure.



Cairn above Asket Dub la/general/n cairn and view to south feb 06

Extractive industries and limekilns : The majority of the quarries are on the northern part of the Common, around Little Asby, and near the enclosed lands, where they would be accessible for dry stone walling or to provide limestone for limekilns. There are large areas of stripped limestone pavement next to the limekilns at Burtree, Grange Scar, Asket Dub and the limekilns of Little Asby.



Grange Scar Limekiln, archaeology report site 12

la/limekiln/limekiln 2, 21.3.03

Trackways : There are several trackways on the Common, the most important being those following the principal Lousy Brow valley across the Common leading to Little Asby. These hollow ways follow the line of an ancient drove way, and pack horse route along a natural communication route between the Lune and Eden Valleys. The route was formalised by the construction of the present day through road.



la/general/road

Pre historic period

There are over twenty sites of prehistoric character on the Common, eighteen of which were discrete findspots of lithic scatters reflecting contemporary activity, e.g. a site at Lousy Brow where Mesolithic flint tools were found, and six sites yielding Late Neolithic Grooved Ware and Peterborough pottery. The lithic scatters cover a broad time span, from the Mesolithic up to the Romano-British period, and for the most part are located on the lower ground to the south of the limestone scars. A cairn at Mazon Wath is the most obvious and important funerary monument and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. It is a large, prominent Bronze Age funerary cairn and is located deliberately on the edge of a steep scarp slope with a wide southerly facing vista. All three funerary cairns on the Common are located in the southern part. There is also evidence of land clearance from this period and three small areas of cairnfield which result from the removal of surface stone from the land into piles so as to improve the agricultural potential of the land. All the cairnfields are within an area defined by two parallel banks, implying the edges of an early field or plot. This is significant and suggests the rationalization of the land to accommodate agriculture.

Roman period

There is only one site with evidence of a Roman date on the Common – a findsite where flint scatters were discovered and a mid first century hinged Romano-British brooch. This could imply occupation of the Common in this period, or that the road over the Common may have had an earlier use as a natural routeway between the Lune and Eden Valleys. Pollen samples taken from Sunbiggin Tarn have identified arable cultivation in the area during the Roman period.

Medieval period

There are several Medieval sites relating to settlements/stock enclosures and their field systems. A site on Little Asby Scar for example consists of a large sub rectangular stock enclosure with a rectangular, possibly domestic, structure built into the eastern wall. At the west end, the stock enclosure joined on to a long field boundary that runs southward. There is evidence of rectilinear house settlements and associated basic field systems and there are several wall complexes from this period. For example, between Grange Scar and Little Asby Scar, there is a series of broadly parallel sinuous field banks which divide up the better land of the valley bottom between the elevated limestone scars.

There is an apparent contradiction between these settlements which have defined areas of field system, and the fact that the area was a common, which by definition was land available for the grazing of all within the manor. Despite the development of settlements in this way, they still reflect the transhumant exploitation of the upland common as the commoners attempted to maximize the usage of their summer pasture by informally defining areas for their control of stock. Alternatively, the possibility must exist that these settlements predate the formalisation of the land as common, when there was not the same restriction on the development of permanent occupation.

Post medieval period

In the late 1800s, attempts were made to have the Common enclosed but they failed, possibly due to opposition. The petitions to enclose the commons tell us

that no one lived on the Common, there were “no mines or minerals known or supposed to exist” and the main benefits of enclosure were seen as “ascertaining and settling rights of parties interested and preventing continual quarrels and litigation as to hounding sheep”.

The 1860 First Edition OS map shows a dispersed patchwork of post medieval stock management features such as bields and sheepfolds, boundary cairns and several quarries. In subsequent map editions, there is a general increase in the numbers of stock management features and boundary cairns.

The greatest number of archaeological sites date from the post medieval period. They can be split into three groups according to their function : stock management, quarrying/processing and boundary markers.

Stock management features : The exposed nature of the limestone scars led to a need for extensive bields and sheepfolds being constructed on the Common. The vast majority of these features will be post medieval, but favourable locations may have been re-used time and again to keep stock sheltered, so they may have earlier origins.

Quarrying and processing : The quarrying sites have a scattered distribution. There is plentiful evidence to demonstrate the effects of the lime industry in this area and the commercial removal of limestone from Little Asby Scar. There are also quarries associated with the construction and maintenance of the roads on the Common, quarries for building the walls surrounding the Common, and quarries on the northern part of the Common associated with the extraction of limestone pavement for building and processing in the limekilns. There is an exposure of a copper vein on the south east corner of Little Asby Scar and there is a possible copper processing site nearby above Armaside Wood.

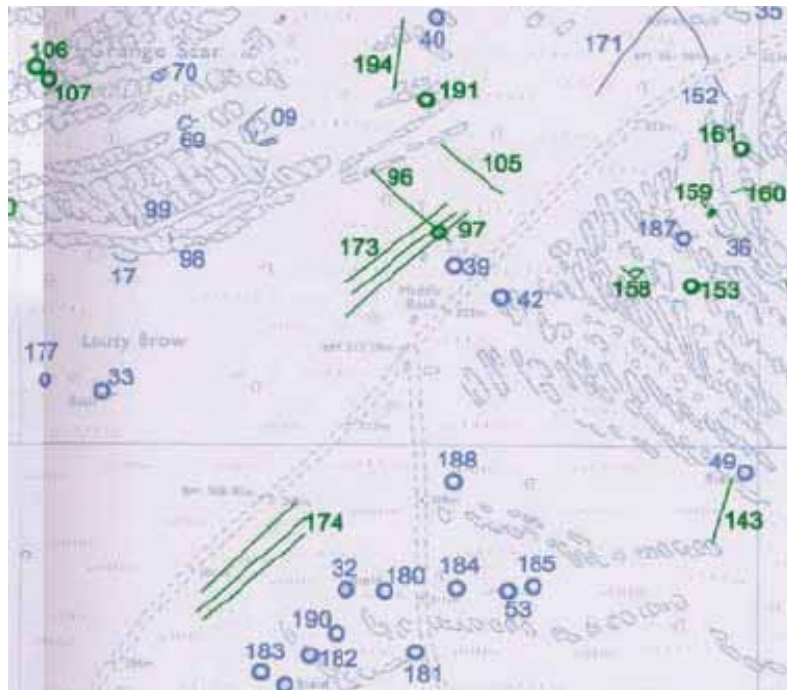
Boundary markers : The southern and western boundaries of the Common correspond to the parish boundary between Little Asby and Crosby Garrett parishes. On the south eastern side the boundary uses the natural line of Potts Beck. The western boundary takes a fairly arbitrary line linking topographic features such as Sunbiggin Tarn, Seavy Dub and natural erratics such as Mitchell's Stone. In the absence of natural features, boundary cairns were constructed. By the time of the First Edition 1863 map, the line of the parish boundary had been formalised with a dry stone wall.

The key aspect in terms of the archaeological resource on the Common is the extent to which it has remained a coherent, unimproved upland landscape during the post medieval period – this has almost certainly contributed to the survival of all elements from earlier periods.

Visiting archaeological sites

All sites on the Common are accessible on foot, but they are often hard to identify. The archaeology report recommended the following sites may be of interest to the public – they can be easily identified and are easily accessible from the road.

The sites (see map) are all to the north of the T junction in the middle of the Common. In order of nearness to the road, the sites are :-



Site 105 : Stone Bank at Middle Busk, GR 686093

A fragmentary wall running north west/south east. It measures approx 100m long by 0.7m wide and upto only 0.1, high. Its condition is poor as most of it has been removed or covered with turf. This bank demarcates land within the small grassed valley between the limestone pavements of Grange Scar and Little Asby Scar. There are two other similar stone banks on the Common.

Site 96 : Stone Bank at Middle Busk, GR 685093

An enclosure wall running almost from the road upto an outcrop of limestone pavement. The bank measures 1.4m wide and survives to a max height of 0.2m. Its condition is medium, it survives mostly as an earthen bank with some stone and it is cut by several hollow ways. As with site 105, it demarcates a small grassed valley between Grange and Little Asby Scars.

Site 09 : Rectilinear House Settlement at Grange Scar, GR 683095

This site has a large semi circular boundary wall with orthostatic walling in vertical slabs facing inwards, whilst other slabs are horizontal with their faces pointing out. The wall measures 0.8m high by 1.5m wide in places and is on top of an outcrop of limestone pavement. Parts of the wall are constructed of an earthbank mixed with large stones. Associated with the wall is a shieling/building which is two celled and sub rectangular in shape and has been butted onto the boundary wall at its west end. To the north of the shieling is another small internal stone bank that appears to be the sectioning off of a small area between the outcrops of limestone pavement.

Site 69 : Enclosure at Grange Scar, GR 682094

This site is a sub circular enclosure 60m west of site 09, and survives to a height of 0.50m. The enclosure measures 15m in diameter and the walls are 1.2m in width. The south east facing entrance is visible which is 2m in width. Outside the enclosure, a wall running north east/south west heads off towards site 09

Site 70 : Enclosure at Grange Scar, GR 681095

This site is a sub rectangular rectilinear house consisting of a single celled structure with an associated stock enclosure, and was possibly a shieling. The building has been constructed into a shallow natural depression to give more protection from the weather. The dwelling is smaller than the stock enclosure and measures 7m square with walls 1m in width and 0.2m in height. The stock enclosure is 10m in diameter and the walls measure 1.2m wide by 0.2m high.

Ownership

The Common was part of the Manor of Little Asby, first mentioned in the reign of Henry II when Little Asby was owned by Richard L'Engleys. As yet we do not know much about the ownership of the Common until the 1960s.

FLD completed the purchase of Little Asby Common on 15 January 2003 from Watson Sayer Properties Ltd. It is understood that Mr Watson Sayer of Helbeck Quarry, saw both limestone extraction and shooting potential of the area when the family purchased it in the 1960s from Appleby Castle Estate.