

LITTLE ASBY THROUGH THE KEYHOLE

Summary Report



WESTMORLAND DALES



Made possible with

**Heritage
Fund**

PROJECT

The Westmorland Dales Landscape Partnership Scheme aims to unlock and reveal the hidden heritage of the Westmorland Dales, which lies to the north of the Howgill Fells in Cumbria within the Yorkshire Dales National Park. This five-year scheme is primarily funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and involves 22 different projects, that explore the area's natural and cultural heritage.

One of these projects is Little Asby Through the Keyhole. The aim of the community-based archaeological investigation was to develop an understanding of the rich heritage across Little Asby Common.

The common is grazed by the Asby Commoners Association and is owned by Friends of the Lake District. It is an upland landscape dominated by limestone pavement. This was formed in the Carboniferous period, over 300 million years ago, when northern England was covered in shallow tropical seas, and limy mud on the sea floor eventually hardened into layers of limestone containing fossils of corals, sponges and brachiopod shells.

Over the last two decades, Friends of the Lake District commissioned Oxford Archaeology North to carry out a number of different surveys across the common. These surveys identified around 200 features, revealing a landscape with considerable time depth. Concentrations of sites

were identified as seven survey areas, with further work identified to be delivered through the Westmorland Dales Scheme.

This consisted of two seasons of excavations. The first season (September 2021) involved the excavation of 16 keyhole trenches. These trenches were typically about 1m by 6m in size and investigated a number of features across this landscape. The second season (September 2022) consisted of seven trenches, focusing on one site.

In addition, a short transect of six cores were taken in season one through the sediments at the edge of Sunbiggin Tarn. The cores were analysed and the samples dated using carbon 14 techniques. Despite a relatively poor pollen count from many of the samples it has been possible, in combination with a previous but undated pollen core, to use the available data to interpret a broad outline of palaeoenvironmental changes in this area, which can be linked with the excavation results.

Over the two years, 59 volunteers have been involved, volunteering 264 days and learning archaeological skills.



Figure 1 Volunteers taking the core sample © Oxford Archaeology North

RESULTS

The results from both seasons have revealed activity stretching back 12,000 years. The landscape would have appeared very differently in the Mesolithic period (10,000-4,000 BC). The pollen assemblage from the base of the core indicated an environment of abundant mixed woodland vegetation, dominated by hazel, oak, elm, birch, pine and finally alder. From the early Mesolithic onwards the presence of microcharcoal particles may be interpreted to suggest that humans were using fire deliberately during this period to clear trees, and there is evidence in the presence of certain species of fungal spores to infer grazing animals. The clearance activity is most likely linked to hunting practices.



Figure 2 Interpretation of the landscape during the Mesolithic period, illustration by James Innerdale.

Subsequently, there are apparent decreases in certain types of pollen, including elm in the Neolithic period (4,000-2,200 BC). This activity, along with the rise in cereal pollen, would suggest that arable farming began in this period, earlier than previously expected. Charcoal has been dated to this period suggesting further vegetation clearance activity. In addition, a flake from a polished stone axe has been uncovered, likely a fragment from a Group VI axe (otherwise called Langdale Axe). Its size and morphology suggest it was probably detached during use of the implement, maybe when clearing trees.



Figure 3 A flake from a polished stone axe



Figure 4 The barbed and tanged arrowhead, credit Oxford Archaeology North

There was continued clearance in the Bronze Age (2,200-700 BC). The landscape would not have been completely cleared at once, instead it would have been cleared over time and in some cases repeatedly cleared where areas had regrown. As well as vegetation clearance, there is also clearance of stone from land with a cairnfield dated to the early Bronze Age. A small barbed and tanged arrowhead has also been diagnostically dated to this period. It is of white flint from the chalk Wolds (north-east or midlands) which demonstrates a degree of movement across the landscape and trade (as well as possible continued hunting activity). The core sample also revealed a decrease in pine pollen, along with the continued presence of cereal pollen. This is supported by the co-axial field system dated to the mid-late Bronze Age.¹ The surviving traces consist of roundhouses and livestock enclosures, evidence of pastoral farming, but also subtle evidence of terracing for arable farming. This is evidence of widespread, organised farming across over 100 hectares of this landscape.



Figure 5 An interpretation of the coaxial field system on Little Asby Common showing both pastoral and arable farming, illustration by James Innerdale.

By the Iron Age there was a general sparsity of tree and shrub pollen in the core sample, suggesting regional woodland clearance had occurred. Evidence infers a largely open environment of sedge moorland with perhaps isolated stands of certain tree species and scrub. It is possible low-scale arable cultivation continued, but grazing of the land would have continued, along with exploitation of natural resources by the local population. A handful of archaeological sites can be dated broadly from the early medieval to the early post-medieval periods. Transhumance or the seasonal migration of farmers and their herds to the uplands

¹ Coaxial field systems are characterised by uniformly small, conjoined rectangular field plots, with an adherence to a particular axial symmetry, developing along a particular axis or at right angles to it - Historic England, *Field Systems: Introductions to Heritage Assets* (Swindon, 2018).

during the summer months was commonly practiced across northern England during the medieval period. Some examples seem to have developed into proto-farmsteads, permanently occupied houses, featuring ancillary buildings, associated stock enclosures and field systems, and there are several possible examples which can be identified at Little Asby Common. Some of these may have been linked to the monastic grange.



Figure 6 An interpretation of a shieling site, illustration by Allan T. Adams.

The practice of transhumance on this landscape may have continued into the 17th century. And documentary evidence suggests that grazing of the land continued, along with quarrying and other activity.



A film exploring the excavation can be found here - <https://www.friendsofthelakedistrict.org.uk/news/little-asby-through-the-keyhole-season-two>

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Please note that this summary report has been created using the reports created by Oxford Archaeology North:

Oxford Archaeology North, 'Little Asby Through the Keyhole, Community Archaeology Excavation: Season One Report', 2022

Oxford Archaeology North, 'Little Asby Through the Keyhole, Community Archaeological Excavation: Season Two Report', 2023

Oxford Archaeology North, 'Sunbiggin Tarn, Palaeoenvironmental Assessment Report', 2022

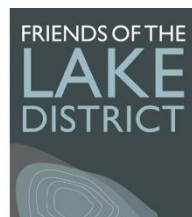


Figure 7 Volunteers captured by drone, © Oxford Archaeology North

