

BORROWDALE VALLEY

INTRODUCTION

Allfred Wainwright called it the fairest valley of the Lake District. Another quote from Edmund Cassons *The Wise Kings of Borrowdale* sums up the beauty of the dale:

. . .O most fair Glory of Cumberland,
I worship thee.
Thou art what God hath shewn us of heaven's light.
With me rejoice, O Cumbrians, and praise God
For the shadow of His beauty.



Borrowdale, walled in part by high, sharp-edged crags, is located in Cumbria's volcanic central mountains. Stretching from the head of Derwent Water south to Seathwaite, it is the main access to the central part of the Lake District. Sty Head Pass connects Wasdale with Borrowdale. Honister Pass connects the Borrowdale and Buttermere valleys. Its glacial lake, Derwentwater, contains four islands - Derwent Island, St Herbert's Island (named after a hermit who once lived there), Lord's Island (the site of the first smelter in Keswick) and Rampsholme Island. Derwentwater was once joined to Bassenthwaite Lake until river-borne deposits silted up the section to the west of Keswick. The best way to enjoy Derwentwater is by a cruise on the Keswick Launch. Lodore Falls are an impressive sight after heavy rain, when the waters of Watendlath Beck discharge their load over the edge of the hanging valley, before escaping into Derwentwater. Edmund Casson certainly presented a romantic view of Borrowdale in his poem, "The Wise Kings of Borrowdale", and the dale continues to be a favourite with visitors in the present day.

Watendlath's quiet nook.
A farm is there and a slated barn,
And a waterfall; and a pebbly tarn;
And all the way to High Lodore
The banks of the beck are painted o'er
With red herb-willow and red loose-strife

ARCHAEOLOGY & HISTORY

The valley is distinctive for its 'Borrowdale Volcanics' which poured (sometimes shot) out of volcanic vents above the Skiddaw Slates in Ordovician times, about 400 million years ago.

Silurian slaty beds were then laid down on top of them, these harder Borrowdale rocks have weathered slowly and form crags and precipices above the softer soil-covered sediments to the south and east. The traces of glaciation are very easy to see in Borrowdale; there is a distinctive U-shaped section of the upper dale between Thorneythwaite and Seathwaite. In Langstrath and Greenup Gill there is a great spread of the hummocky moraine of the most recent glaciation. Other parts of the valley include roches moutonnées (ice-smoothed rock outcrops), hanging valleys and abandoned erratics (large boulders dumped by the retreating ice). Rosthwaite, is built around a rocky outcrop known as 'the How'. Glaciers once gouged their way through the valley, plucking off lumps of rock, polishing exposed outcrops and stripping top soils. When the ice began to melt 10,000 years ago, all this eroded material was dumped in the form of moraines (linear ridges) - at least three have been identified in the Rosthwaite area. Balanced precariously on its small base below the slopes of Kings How, the Bowder Stone (approximately 1900 tons in weight) is a glacial landmark. It was popular with the Victorians, and one bored a hole through the stone. There are now steps to the top and at the bottom it is just possible to shake hands with someone on the other side. The block of stone probably fell from the cliff face.

Dream that heaven is very like this land,
Mountains and lakes and rivers undecaying,
And simple woodlands and wild cherry
flowers. For though this land is but the
shadow of heaven, It yet is heaven's shadow



Borrowdale takes its name from the Scandinavian *borgardalr*, meaning 'the valley of the fort'. The remains of a supposed Romano-British fort lie on the summit of Castle Crag, a well-known viewpoint at the southern end of the gorge. Wainwright recommended it as a climb to take back an enduring memory of the beauty and atmosphere of the district.

Prehistoric occupation within Borrowdale is known to have begun during the Neolithic period, when the valley was thought to be part of an important trade route. The most important evidence for early activity appears in the form of stone quarries and tool manufacturing sites located high in the central fells. There is also evidence of Bronze age cairnfield occupation and funerary sites on the Seathwaite fells. It was anciently called Boredale, and the mountain and its southern extremity is still called Stye Head, and is supposed to be the place where wild boars "were wont to feed in summer, and fall down in autumn into this dale, where they fed upon nuts and acorns". Many of the Scandinavian place names testify to the arrival of Norse speakers into the region after the eighth century.

There is, as yet, no evidence of early medieval activity in the area. The majority of the land of Borrowdale was owned by the monks of Furness Abbey from the 13th century onwards. Much of the dale was purchased from Alice II de Rumelli of Allerdale in 1209, who had, in the closing years of the 12th century, sold parts of Borrowdale – Watendlath (now owned by the National Trust), Langstrath, and Stonethwaite - to another great Cistercian monastery, Fountains Abbey of Yorkshire. Granges (including the modern day village of Grange) were established and the area was used for agriculture and industrial activities such as mining, woodland management, and iron working. During the 14th century, many farms and villages were abandoned because of

Scottish raids in 1315, 1322, and 1345. There six scheduled monuments and 21 listed buildings in Borrowdale. Altogether there are 735 sites, monuments and buildings within the current tenancy of the National Trust's Borrowdale Farms (including fell land) - *see later*. Grange is approached over a double arched bridge dating as far back as 1675.



In the fells above Seathwaite, there were deposits of wad (also known as 'black-cawke', 'black-lead', 'plumbago', 'graphite'), mentioned by Camden in 1555 and then exploited over the next two centuries until it became a thriving industry in the eighteenth century. Formed by extreme pressure and heat, it was used, during Queen Elizabeth I's reign, to make moulds for cannon balls (later its value as pencil lead was exploited). The mineral was very valuable at the time and the mines were protected by armed guards. In addition, an old copper mine was reopened in nearby Newlands in the 1550's with the aid of German miners who proceeded to discover quantities of silver and lead as well as copper. These mineral were taken to landing stages on Derwent Water - Nichol End, Copperheap Bay and Brandlewhow - and transported across the lake to the large smelting works at Brigham. From that time an industrial economy was imposed on Borrowdales farming fabric. Copper was added to the mining mix. Despite security measures, smuggling of wad out of Borrowdale was a regular occurrence in the eighteenth century, as it commanded a high price; thirty shillings a pound in 1779. Borrowdale remained an an isolated valley until a road was built in 1842 connecting it to Keswick, to the North. The graphite was used primarily for dye, pencils and medicine. By 1847, there were 14 pencil factories in Keswick.



In the early 18th century, slate quarrying developed. The Lakeland Green slate found through Borrowdale and up to Honister became the main source of building material for Victorian Keswick. The reopened Honister Slate Mine gives a fascinating insight into yesteryear as well as showing how slate is relevant today.



Grange, at the beginning of the valley, is known for its double-arched bridge of 1675 that crosses the Derwent River. The Yew Tree, at Seatoller, is an amalgamation of two cottages built in 1628. They served, during Queen Elizabeth I reign, as accommodation for German miners when graphite was mined.

At the so-called Jaws of Borrowdale, near Grange, the river runs under steep cliffs through a gorge. Thomas Gray, an 18th century romantic poet, described the Jaws as a menacing ravine whose rocks might, at any time, fall and crush a traveller. Much of the valley was covered by the Fawcet Forest. There still remain areas of broadleaved and conifer woodlands, most belonging to the National Trust. The oak woods are of particular note.

FLORA & FAUNA

Borrowdale probably has a greater amount of semi-natural woodland of native trees than any other Lake District valley. Most of these woods are 'hanging' on steep, well-drained and often rocky slopes. The fine sessile oak woodlands are of particular ecological interest, and the damp, western climate supports internationally important lichens, mosses, ferns, rare liverworts and insects. These are the last remnants of the temperate rainforests that once covered the western coasts of Britain. An alder woodland and marsh along the shores of Derwentwater provide an ideal nesting site for wildfowl and waders. The oak woods have been recognised by designation as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Special Areas of Conservation. Four well known woods with easy public access are Ashness, Johnny's, Great and Stonethwaite Woods East.



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The Borrowdale Yew at Seathwaite Farm is one of the four ancient yews (*Taxus baccata*) celebrated in Wordsworth's 1803 poem, 'Yew Trees':

'But worthier still of note
Are those Fraternal Four of Borrowdale
Joined in one solemn and capacious grove
Huge trunks! and each particular trunk a growth
Of intertwined fibres serpentine'

One of the four went down at Rosthwaite Farm in a great storm in 1883 but it still impressed Wordsworth, who proclaimed its diameter was large enough to be a cave entrance. The three others still survive. The Borrowdale Yew is female and boasts a large hollow that fits four people. Although it was damaged in a storm in 2005, the tree still thrives and has the potential to live for many more years.

Seatoller Wood, Sourmilk Gill & Seathwaite, Borrowdale - Graphite Mine Site of Special Scientific Interest



- bird cherry



- lichens on ash



- yews

It is also a haven for much distinctive fauna: buzzards, ravens, peregrines, kestrels, barn owl and a plethora of smaller birds; deer (including the black fallow - see picture below), red squirrels, badgers, stoats, weasels, otter, lizards and butterflies;



Derwenwater, together with Bassenthwaite Lake, are the only two lakes in the UK that harbour the endangered vendace - a relic fish from the last Ice Age.



Rainbow and Brown Trout can be found at the beautiful Watendlath Tarn. The River Derwent and its tributaries is one of the finest large river systems in Europe. The quality and importance of the wildlife and habitats along the river is widely recognised and they are protected under European law as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The river is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Salmon and sea trout are in decline on the Greta and Derwent as in many other parts of the U.K. The Derwent and Greta rivers and their tributaries are key spawning and nursery areas for these fish and essential to their survival. The descent can be paddled from Borrowdale into Derwentwater, Bassenthwaite Lake and to the tidal limit at Workington by permit and booking system.

The Upper Derwent is fed by several other rivers in the valleys at the head of Borrowdale. It then leaves Derwentwater, is joined by the Greta at Keswick (Middle Derwent), on its way to Bassenthwaite Lake which outflows (Lower Derwent) through Cockermouth to the Irish Sea at Workington

FARMING

In 1418, according to the Fountains Abbey survey, there were 41 farmsteads in Borrowdale. The reformation of 1537 began the transference of monastic lands to the crown and the change in systems of land ownership which supported the emergence of yeoman farmers. The extensive lands of Fountains Abbey were sold by Henry VIII to Richard Greames of Eske in Netherby, whose son forfeited them: by the 'great deed of Borrowdale'; in 1615 they passed into the hands of tenants. (Bouch & Jones, **The Lake Counties 1500-1830** (1961)p.56) 'Customary tenant right ensured the survival of a traditional society of small owner-occupiers' (Angus Winchester, **Harvest of the Hills** 2000, p.16)

There was a major growth in farm building beginning during the 17th and 18th centuries. The agricultural land was gradually enclosed during the 18th and 19th centuries.

In 1829, 21 farmers. In 1925 19 farmers. In 1938 18 farmers including 2 over 150 acres. In 2009 there are 12 sheep farmers in Borrowdale as follows:

Fold Head Farm, Watendlath
Steps End Farm, Watendlath
Stonethwaite Farm, Stonethwaite
Seathwaite Farm, Seathwaite

Thomeythwaite Farm, Thomeythwaite
Seatoller Farm, Seatoller
Chapel House Farm, Stonethwaite
Yewtree Farm, Rosthwaite

Nook Farm, Rosthwaite
Hollows Farm, Grange

High Lodore Farm, Borrowdale
Ashness Farm, Borrowdale



A number also have cattle; all of them use their fells. These are large tracts of shared open and common land which often join areas grazed by farmers from other valleys. Farming in Borrowdale, as in all these central Lake District valleys, depends upon a working collaboration between the farmers. Identification of sheep (for purposes of retrieval and traditional heafing) are essential to this pastoral system

Borrowdale has landscape patterns which have evolved slowly from medieval times up to the present day. These patterns reflect a continuity of farming practice which make this valley and others in the Lake District and Cumbria a unique cultural landscape of international importance. Beatrix Potter owned two farms in the valley.



WEATHER

Borrowdale records the highest rainfall in England; an annual average of 185 inches falls on a small patch of land near Sprinkling Tarn. Coming down the valley, the rainfall decreases: Seathwaite:131 inches;Rosthwaite: just over 100 inches; Grange: 90 inches;Keswick: 57 inches

BORROWDALE - YESTERYEAR AND TODAY

In 1829 the Borrowdale community included:

2 publicans; a joiner and cartwright; a schoolmaster; a blacksmith; a slate proprietor, the agent for the Black Lead works at Seathwaite and 21 farmers of whom 13 are classed as 'yeomen'.

It is now based around tourism with numerous hotels, guest houses and camping barns. Even the farmers have had to succumb to the relentless tide of tourism by providing accommodation and farm visits. Borrowdale stages a Shepherds Meet and Show each year. Fell racing, sheepdog trials, hound trailing, and craft displays are part of the action. In August a 17 mile fell race is

held. The Cumbria Way passes through the valley as does the Coast to Coast walk. The 58-mile long Allerdale Ramble runs from Borrowdale to Silloth, on the north west coast of the county. It is also an important venue in outdoor leisure and pursuits with activities ranging from rock climbing, abseiling, ghyll scrambling to canoeing and kayaking.