NEWSLETTER No. 31 – SPRING 2021

1. From the Chairman

I hope this finds you well and cheerfully occupied. Many of you will have been vaccinated by now – a step in the right direction. We have been joined by several new members recently and extend a warm welcome to them.

This year has begun with another period of uncertainty. We can only make provisional plans. The committee feels that to organise any live activities before 21 June, would be unwise. If we arrange for the scheduled June visit to **Hills Tower,** Dumfries, after that date, with members of the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group (SVBWG), we will let you all know in good time.

The hope was that we could reinstate the 2020 programme in 2021, but that looks increasingly unlikely at least until the late summer. Whenever we can resume, we will have to make sure that expenses are covered, as income has been much reduced and funds depleted by publications. Many past events have been free or subsidised and we want to keep the subscription low. Thank you to everyone for renewing their membership. We do not receive grants or donations, but rely on your subscriptions and aim to be financially self sufficient.

Hills Tower is a remarkable building which I am sure you would enjoy. 'Grade A' listed, (Scottish equivalent to the English Grade 1), it consists of a sixteenth century tower with a two storey house of 1723 adjoining, set in a walled courtyard with a gatehouse. Niall Logan, chairman of SVBWG, will write about it in the June newsletter, which will mostly be on the theme of **tower houses.**

If any of you wants to write about a Cumbrian tower, from free standing towers such as Dacre Castle or towers with halls, eg Blencowe, or send a photograph, contributions will be welcome. Past appeals for photographs have resulted in little or no response, those associated with events excepted, so here is a **challenge.**
Many of you live in houses with fire windows or know of one in your neighbourhood. **Please send us your photographs of fire windows** with location, by the end of May and we will publish them in the June issue.

By the time you receive this, we will have held two Zoom events, Paul Lewis on Scales Hall on 26 March and myself on the use of Inventories on 29 March. Many organisations and groups are making a variety of good talks available on Zoom. Mike Turner makes sure that you receive information about them. Thank you, Mike.

To end on a sad note, I am sorry to report that one of our most regular attenders at events, Kath Smith, died in January, after a fall and complications in November. We send our sympathy to Alan. It will help him if you all know, and make it easier for him when he attends future events.
Look after yourselves and enjoy the spring. Remember that we would like photographs for a **calendar** as you begin to get out and about ■

June L Hill

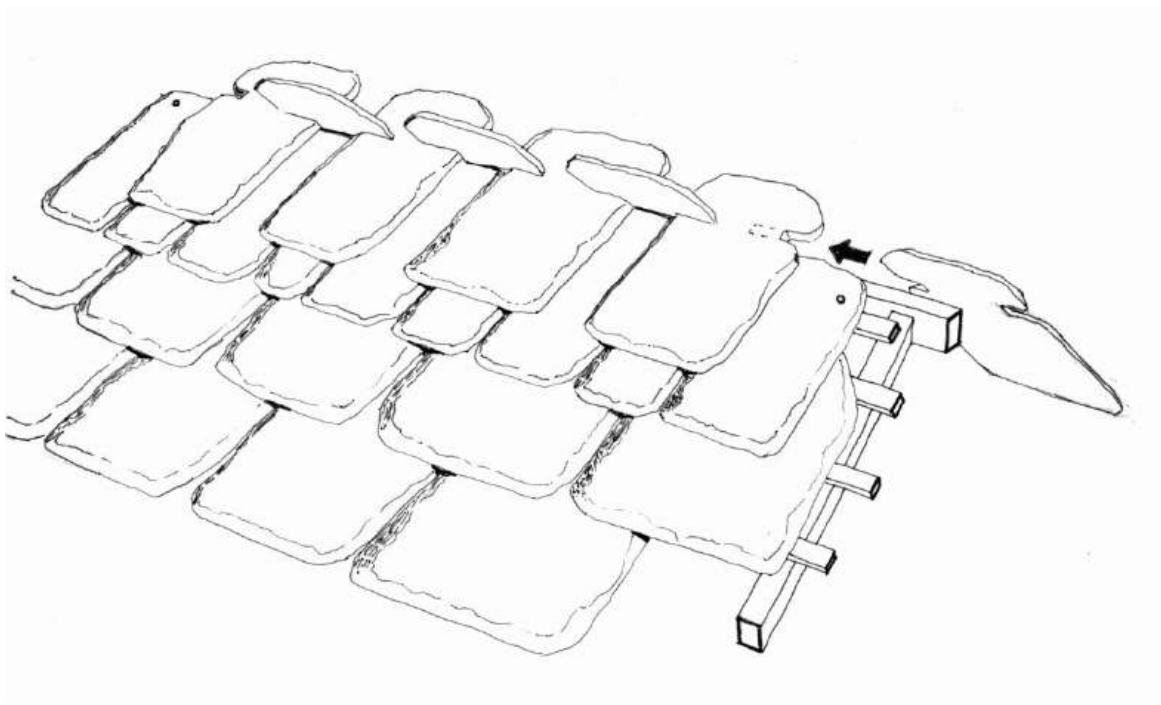
2. Wrestler Slates in south west Cumbria – Richard Wilson

The renovation of an old house often brings to light items or features that can give a tantalising impression of the earlier phases of its history. Damaged or incomplete objects may be the only remaining evidence that can demonstrate unusual characteristics which may otherwise have been lost without record.

Figure 1: The recovered roofing slate © R. Wilson

A recent illustration of this was the discovery of a roofing slate during work to a damaged drystone wall at Parkhead Farm, near Millom. The local slate is traditionally used in walls and as a roofing material, but it is not particularly fissile. It produces slates of uneven thickness and with irregular surfaces. The item recovered from the wall measures 28cm x 15cm x 20cm max, and is distinctive for the large nicks cut into each of the long sides, towards one end. Their size and position strongly suggests that it is a 'wrestler slate', which had probably been removed from the house or one of the outbuildings during earlier repairs or alterations. (Fig. 1)

The limestones and sandstones found throughout the UK are frequently used as roofing materials, and many are also capable of being carved into ridge stones. This is not true of districts where slate predominates; the intractability of the stone dictated that an alternative method had to be devised to finish the vulnerable ridge in a secure fashion. Wrestler slates are plain slates which are notched on both perpendicular sides, to enable interlocking. Slates are laid alternately on the roof slopes, giving the ridge a distinctive serrated profile. The remainder of the roof is usually constructed as is the traditional way for natural slates, with diminishing (graduated) courses ranging from the largest stones at the eaves to the smallest under the ridge. The configuration of wrestler slates is such that coverage is not continuous, and care had to be taken to ensure that there was a close fit with the course below. Minor gaps were unavoidable, and it is assumed that a renewable material would have been placed under the ridge to keep water ingress to a minimum. Turf or sheep's wool may have been used, but given the improbable survival of any unaltered roofs, this could be difficult to prove. The connected wrestler slates appear to have depended on their combined weight to resist movement, with nail or peg fixings being considered unnecessary. In places where there was no option but to use small slates for the ridge, mortar was sometimes spread over the outer surfaces as a measure against wind lift.



Wrestler tile arrangement, drawing © Richard Wilson

According to the Stone Roofing Association (www.stoneroof.org.uk), wrestler slate ridges were to be found in such diverse regions as Devon, Pembrokeshire, and the Yorkshire Dales – as well as Cumbria. Few examples appear to have survived; this is perhaps due to the problem of keeping them weathertight, but the availability of more convenient alternatives from the early 19th century onwards would probably account for the loss of the majority.

In Cumbria, the best known surviving examples are in Troutbeck and Ambleside. Thwaite is one of the houses seen on the CVBG's Troutbeck trail, and it will also be familiar to those who attended the VAG conference tour in 2015. It was selected by Brunskill to illustrate the wrestler slate detail in several of his books. Bridge House, in Ambleside, is more widely known, thanks to its appearance on thousands of postcards. It was built on top of a small bridge, where it served as an entry to an apple orchard, whose produce were stored in its upper storey. The National Trust dates it to the 17th century, but the wrestler ridge is probably a recreation that was carried out as part of the 1920s restoration, which followed a public campaign to save the building.

The discovery of the wrestler slate at Parkhead provides evidence that the technique was once very widespread. No intact local examples are known to exist, although it is possible that a few might survive in remote locations. The opening of the railway in the 1850s would have enabled a ready supply of convenient building materials, including ridges made of clay, stone and concrete, rendering the old methods obsolete.

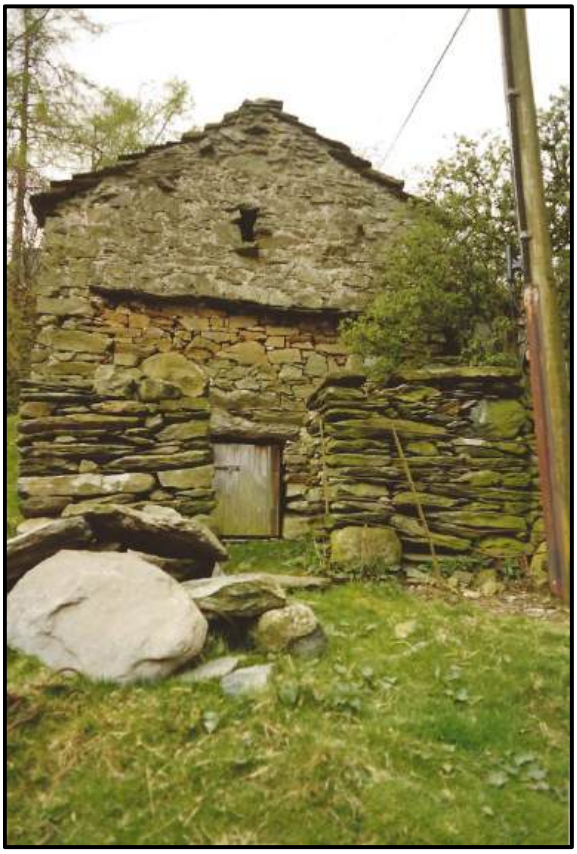
It is somewhat surprising that only one complete slate, plus a fragment of another, have been found so far. The hole drilled in the intact slate provides the likely answer; once they were superseded by other materials, it is likely that wrestlers were trimmed for reuse as plain slates. In this instance, the slate has retained its nicks, but the hole indicates that it was hung the other way up after the change of function. The hole is intended for a nail, rather than a peg, which suggests a 19th century 'recycling' date. It must be concluded from this that many former 'wrestlers' must survive incognito on slate roofs throughout the slaty parts of Cumbria ■

Wrestler examples: Above: Bridge House, Ambleside
Left: Thwaite, Troutbeck. Image © Mike Turner

3. SLATE DRYING FLOORS IN CORN DRYING KILNS – Graham Brooks

Most members will be aware of the corn drying kiln situated at Hartsop and that the floor over which the grain was spread is made of strips of slate. The initial floor is supported on substantial slate joists and between these are smaller slate strips. On top of these would have been placed a cloth either of horse hair or wire. A similar arrangement is described by A. Raistrick in his book Industrial Archaeology[1] describes kiln drying floors as built from 'long narrow stones set side by side like the joists under a floor, but touching, so that grain would not fall through. Each side of each stone beam has channels cut in close together, deep at the base and shallow at the top. These corresponded in adjacent beams, making a floor with a regular pattern of funnels leading heat from the fire up to the narrow-slitted floor on which the corn was dried.'

The Dalemain estate had a number of corn mills and their associated drying kilns and in the book Two Thousand Five Hundred Cumberland and Westmorland Folk[2] details for the building/rebuilding of a number of drying kilns is given. Three of them would appear to have slate drying floors and the source of the slate is listed as either Mosedale or Wrengill quarries. The slates are described as two different types either laths or whelps.



Corn drying mill at Hartsop © Mike Turner

The laths came in horse loads and a load cost 9d a load at the quarry and carriage was either 10d a load from Mosedale or 14d from Wrengill to the mill at Thornthwaite. This used 31 loads of laths (it also got 54 loads of slates from Mosedale quarry at 13d per load and 10d carriage). 50 stone kiln whelps were also require at 1.5d each. The source of these whelps is not known.

At Dalemain mill slightly more detail is given. The stone whelps were obtained from Penrith Fell and were 4ft 4 inch long by 14 inch broad and cost 2d each and 55 were purchased. William and John Sisson the masons were paid for 'laying on the stone beams and dressing the stone whelps & setting them on & also dressing the stone laths & setting them on.' In this case 700 laths were ordered at 2s 6d per 100 and they were carried down Ullswater from Patterdale to Waterfoot.

The question has to be what are the definition of lath and whelp in these cases?■

[1] A Raistrick Industrial Archaeology P. 90 1973 Paladin.

[2] F Wilkins Two Thousand Five Hundred Cumberland and Westmorland Folk. 2006 Wyre Forest Press.

4. VAG online conference on Houses and the Hearth Tax in Britain, 9 January 2021

The VAG Winter conference normally takes place in Leicester every year, with about 150 VAG members attending, but in 2021 it was held via Zoom. This enabled almost 300 people to participate, including some non-members. The programme was organised by Adrian Green, VAG President, who spoke at the CVBG study day on the vernacular/polite interface held at Burgh-by-Sands in November 2019.

Hearth Tax records are potentially very useful in researching the history of houses. Between 1662 and 1689 the government imposed a levy on all householders across England, Wales and Ireland, measured in terms of the number of hearths in each property. Hearth Tax was one shilling per hearth, paid twice a year by the occupier (or if empty by the owner) on Lady Day, 25 March, and Michaelmas Day, 29 September.

Most of the speakers were from the British Academy Hearth Tax project, which publishes printed volumes and produces Hearth Tax Digital (see https://gams.uni-graz.at/context:htx). The returns list occupiers as well as hearths, and therefore provide a national survey of population and households. In effect they are the nearest thing we have to a national census for that period, and the printed volumes also aim to convey an understanding of the vernacular architecture of the county by including a historical introduction covering the nature of the houses in the locality, as well as reproducing the lists of names and hearth numbers. In Cumbria, we are fortunate that a Hearth Tax volume for Westmorland has already been produced. It was based on returns for Michaelmas 1670 and surveys 1674-5, and published by the British Record Society in 2009. The Cumberland returns are said to be fragmentary, and have not been published.

The introductory speaker was Catherine Ferguson, General Editor of the Hearth Tax series, on "The challenges of the Hearth Tax as a historical source" and as a newcomer to the subject I found this session particularly useful. Catherine pointed out the many pitfalls of using the Hearth Tax for buildings research. Survival of Hearth Tax returns is patchy, some households were exempt e.g. due to poverty or low rent (in which case exemption certificates may survive), some houses were subdivided, and there was under-recording, particularly in the early returns which were based on self-declaration. The Westmorland 1670 return showed that 73% houses had single hearths, which might suggest widespread poverty but more probably reflects under-reporting. Later surveys involved an element of inspection.

The next pair of speakers covered 2 urban areas. First was Peter Guillery on Whitechapel, London. He has worked on the Survey of London Whitechapel project, which you will find online at https://surveyoflondon.org. He was followed by Roger Leech on Bristol. Roger made the point that the Bristol surveys are presented in walking order, which means that they effectively provide a street directory of Bristol in the 1660s. The next two presentations were from David Martin on the High Weald of East Sussex, a very rural area, and David Neave on the East Riding of Yorkshire, an area where there was a shortage of good building materials. He has done some work linking Hearth Tax returns with probate inventories.

Finally we heard from Roger Curtis about a research project in the Scottish Borders, (Scottish Hearth Tax returns were compiled in the 1690s) and Elizabeth Parkinson on Glamorgan houses. Elizabeth also contributed to the Westmorland volume by writing the section on the administration of the Hearth Tax in Westmorland (which you can find on pp15-90 of the document at https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/globalassets/documents/hearth-tax/westmorland-in-the-late-seventeenth-century-by-colin-phillips.pdf)

It was an all day event, with a couple of breaks. I find that Zoom events are surprisingly tiring, and by the end of the day I was flagging. I missed the chance to socialise with other attendees, but it was the only option open to us for the time being. The presentations were delivered by screen sharing, and it worked well apart from one presentation, which ended up with Adrian sharing a backup copy, and involved lots of "next slide please", which was curiously reminiscent of a Government coronavirus briefing. Apart from that glitch, the presentations were all excellent. They were recorded, and they are now available on the VAG website at https://www.vag.org.uk/conferences.htm. They are free to all to view and you don't need to be a member. I found it a very useful introduction to the subject ■

Claire Jeffery

5. Challenge: Fire Windows – June Hill

For members who like a challenge, now is your chance to help the growing collection of photographs, this time of **fire windows.** There are examples of these features all over Cumbria, so what are they?
Fire windows start to appear when chimneys were introduced into houses. The fireplace was given a hood or sited within an inglenook, usually ➧

against a gable or cross wall, so that the smoke was controlled by being funnelled. This enabled floors to be inserted into what had previously been rooms open to the roof, with a central or open hearth, the smoke from which went up into the roof space and eventually out through an opening.

The smoke hood or inglenook created a dark corner near the fire. So that light was admitted, enabling people to work near the fire, small windows were placed near the corner. Cooking, relaxing , even reading, were possible while keeping warm. Fires were the only source of warmth and power in houses. Cooking, craft work such as spinning and carding wool and flax, winding yarn, whittling wood, shoe mending and the like, were common tasks and usually took place in the main room, the hall, or fire house as it was known in Cumbria.

Fire windows were usually smaller than the main windows and sometimes had arched tops, even cusping. Early ones where they survive, may have had glass but often, where glass was not afforded, were filled with wooden shutters or even oiled cloth. Glass, where it was used, was usually fixed and of leaded lights. Iron bars to which glass was fixed or the holes they slotted into, can still be seen. Frames were usually of stone, but there are numerous examples of wooden frames, such as those in Troutbeck.

The Hearth Tax returns of the 1670s show how many rooms had fireplaces. (See the published returns for Westmorland.*) Many homes only had one hearth, sited in the hall. If there was a second hearth, it was usually in the parlour, a room used for sleeping in single storey houses. Better-off households had hearths upstairs. Which ever room they served, fire windows are usually found on the main facade, usually facing south to admit maximum light.

Inscriptions with dates and initials may be seen over some fire windows. When houses were 'modernised' by being given a new frontage with the insertion of sash windows, the tradition as well as the function of fire windows was preserved,
So, see what you can find, and send us your photographs of examples near you, **by the end of May ■**

*Ferguson and Turnbull, eds., Westmorland Hearth Tax, British Record Society and CWAAS, 2008.

6. AN UNUSUAL STRUCTURE AT PARK HOUSE, OVER STAVELEY.

(Text and images by Allan Steward - Hon.Sec. Levens Local History Group)

Image 1 **Image 2**

There is an interesting structure close to Park House farm, Over Staveley. It is situated only a few yards from where the unclassified road (Hall Lane) from Barley Bridge towards Staveley Head ceases to be tarmacked at the entrance to Park House, and on the opposite side of that road.

As will be seen from images 1 and 2 the structure appears to be dug out of the roadside bank with only the slated roof and the top of a wall above ground level. Closer inspection leads me to speculate that whoever built it might have taken advantage of an area which had been quarried out for walling stone and had a vertical inner face, to erect a lean-to structure and then to bank up the outer wall with spoil. This is pure speculation but whether excavated or built-up the result is a kind of artificial cave

Outside the building at the southern end a small spring is running down the bank from close to the roof peak (see image 2). In a later paragraph you will see why I think that the presence of this spring is relevant to the siting of the structure.
The internal dimensions are as follows:-length c12'6", width c6', height (floor to roof peak) c7'6", so it is not large, suggesting its purpose may have been more domestic than farming related.

Images 3 and 4 are of the interior, from which it can be seen that it was strongly built with care and attention to purpose, the uphill side being furnished with stone shelves, neatly worked, walls extensively whitewashed, and floored with irregular stone flags. All of it is in remarkably good condition.

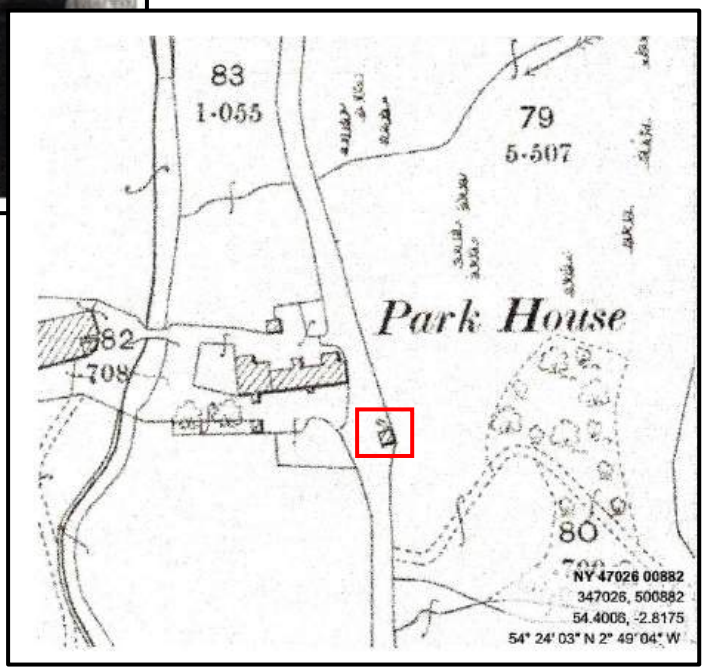
Image 3

In the end wall opposite the door, is an alcove (see image 4) at the base of which it looks as if some bricks have been used to form a small trough. On my visits this "trough" contained water which was trickling onto the flagged floor. This water will have come from the small spring mentioned above. I suggest that this is a deliberate measure, intended to humidify and cool the interior.

What then was the purpose of this structure and from when does it date? It might be significant that it contains nothing other than its own fittings so perhaps its original purpose is now served in other ways. There are no signs of the use of C20 construction methods or materials. It is clearly visible on the second edition OS 25 inches to the mile map (surveyed 1858-59, revised 1897), as the tiny structure,

outlined in red, with a short curved track at it's northern end, see map below. For this, the earliest version I can access, I thank the National Library of Scotland's wonderful online website.

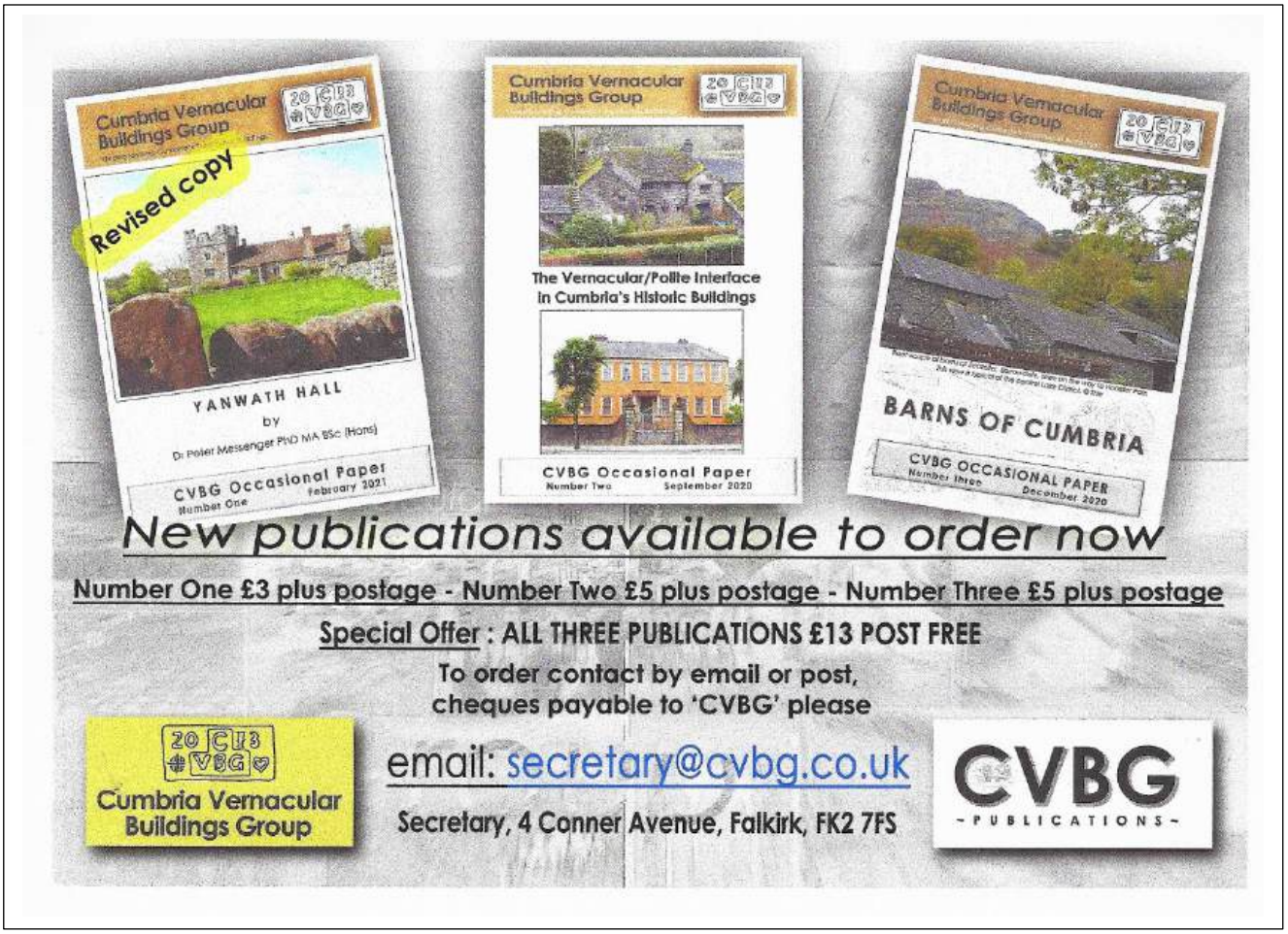
Image 4



Map © National Library of Scotland

Was it, in the era before Westmorland farms had an electricity supply of any sort, intended to be used in the making of, and for keeping fresh, butter which was to be taken for sale in a weekly market in Kendal? Possibly a more likely purpose was as a root cellar, used for the preservation of fruits and vegetables grown to feed those who lived on the farm. Fitted out like a larder it maybe served both purposes. It is not big enough to be used as a turnip clamp to store winter food for farm animals. Maybe the 1910 Land Tax Valuation Survey record would throw some light on it's use.

All new to me but doubtless familiar to the historians of Westmorland farming, but surprisingly invisible to Google, unless using the search term "spring houses" - they can't all be in Pennsylvania!
I think there is one at Beck Head in Witherslack ■



Comments received on 'The Barns of Cumbria' paper

Members seem pleased to have their free copy of the paper, with the December newsletter. Here are a few comments received. Thank you to all who took the trouble to write.

- **"I think these occasional papers are brilliant".** *(Lorraine Moor, Newsletter editor of the Vernacular Architecture Group and the Yorkshire Vernacular Buildings Study Group.)*
- **"...to congratulate you on that fascinating booklet 'Barns of Cumbria'** (from our Patron the Hon Philip Howard, with an order for two more copies.)
- ***"Well done with the Barns publication.* I am sure you are pleased with it."** (Barbara Grundy, committee member CVBG.)
- **"..many thanks from both of us for the superb 'Barns of Cumbria'. The book represents the highest level of scholarly collaboration between a team of experts in this field whose work is immediately accessible to the reader. It is all beautifully produced with lavish photography and very nicely edited. Warmest congratulations to you all."** *(Professor Michael Mullett, now a co-editor of the CWAAS Transactions and author of the recent series of volumes on the history of Penrith.)*