NEWSLETTER No. 47&48 – SUMMER 2025

Cumbria Vernacular Buildings Group

From the Chairman

1. The spring and early summer have seen members enjoying presentations and visits to historic buildings in Troutbeck and Penrith. Sheila Fletcher gave a fascinating talk in May on Penrith's late medieval yards and enthused many to appreciate the development of the town layout.
2. The summer programme will continue with a walk around Milburn, a defensible village in the Eden valley; John McDowell will take the lead on 5th July. Later next month our recording team will be unravelling the history of a remote house and barn with possible medieval beginnings in Little Asby. On 19th August be will be busy at Peter House, reputably the oldest house in Braithwaite; if you wish to be involved in our recording days, please email me at 'paullewiscvbg@gmail.com'. It is hoped to compile ZOOM presentations on our future recorded buildings for the winter months.
3. 6th September will see our Annual General Meeting held at Allen Bank in Grasmere where the National Trust will give us sole access to the house and gardens; after formalities, I will give a guided tour and provide an insight into some recent restoration work to an historic glass collection.
4. In October (at a date to be confirmed) we will be able to revisit Cragg Barn near Dent where the final stages of restoration can be appreciated for their use of traditional crafts and materials.
5. Keep a watchful eye on future notices as the arrangements for our Christmas lunch will soon be published.
6. I am conscious that this is my penultimate year as Chairman, and at this time next year, I hope to be handing the 'batten' to my successor. More pressing is our need to appoint a new Treasurer as the current holder of the post must stand down for personal reasons. If you wish to express an interest in either role, please feel free to email me at 'paullewiscvbg@gmail.com' or catch up with me for a chat at any of our events.

With kindest regards,

P Lewis

2. Ona Ash Dendrology by Andrew Carter

So, what happens when the dendrologists call? Well, it's a cross between root canal work at the dentist and visiting a cheese farm. It involves powerful drills, that are very loud and produce lots of dust and the delicate extraction of the samples from the timbers with a hook, of the core that's been drilled.

It takes time, some degree of brute force and considerable skill to interpret the tree ring samples. CVBG had very generously funded Robert Howard from The Nottingham Tree-Ring Dating Laboratory, to take some tree ring samples from the three crucks in Ona Ash in April 2024.

I'll not go into an analysis of the results here, and I'll leave this for another day, but rather I want to give you an impression of what the process is like.

Everyone likes a mystery, and when you buy a Grade2* thatched cottage, the mystery might be why you would buy it in the first place!? Anyway, clearly, I was mad enough in the first instance to buy it without a survey and that uniquely qualified me no doubt to be it's new custodian. Love is blind and all that. . . .

But the reason for the survey was to solve a mystery. It was becoming clear that Ona Ash was older than 1696, which is date on the door lintel, which opens into the cross passage. The three crucks in the fire house and down house were likely reused or reset and it pointed to an earlier date for the property as we see it now. Indeed, it seems certain, it's much older, and started life as a gable entry single story building, rather than a firehouse and down house as presently configured.

Fig.1

It was hoped getting a date on the crucks would give CVBG a clue as to how old Ona Ash was, and this was where the drill of Robert was pressed into service, (Fig.1)to use modern technology, unavailable in the past to put a scientific date on the timbers in the house.

The first thing that struck me was just how hard these oak timbers are, as it took a good ten minutes to drill into them, filling the room with a lovely smell of hot oak. Scarcely believable when you realise how old the timbers are.

Secondly, just how long the samples were, at least 8 inches in length, and the thickness of your little finger. (Fig.2)

Thirdly, just how lucky I was, that of the eight samples, seven gave a match, which is unheard of. I was warned that I might not get a match on any of the samples. This is because the drill must go through sap wood and heart wood to reliably arrive at a felling date for the tree. In some cases, the last tree ring was still intact and short of having the bark left on the timbers, it was as if it had just been chopped down.

Very briefly, the dating works like this, because trees put on one growth ring a year, it builds up a clock that you can count, not only on the sample in question, but because trees grown in the same area also grow at the same rate, there's natural variation in the thickness of each ring according to the weather that year. In a good year the tree gets fat and in a bad year it barely grows at all. The clever bit is you can build up a chronology for the samples from the house which gives you a long time frame to dial out variables, and in turn you can match this with a regional data base of dated samples. and bingo you can date your own timbers.

All of this requires polishing of the samples and peering down a microscope, but in the case of Ona Ash, the samples had high statistical accuracy, and it was possible to arrive at a felling date for seven out of the eight timbers sampled.(Fig.3)

It's a non destructive process and the structural integrity of the timbers is not affected in any way and the holes are neatly plugged, but not in such a way that you can't see them, it needs to be clear that they have been sampled, if anyone is tempted to do it again.

So, did it answer questions about how old Ona Ash really is? Hmmm, old buildings are not that simple. All I'll say for now is the crucks turned out to be considerably older than I could have hoped or believed possible. Are you sitting down? The oldest felling date is an amazing 1469! Now that I didn't expect ▪

Fig.2

Fig.3

This investigation follows on from the CVBG visit, kindly hosted by the owner Andrew Carter in October 2022. (See also Newsletter No.37)

3. The Thatched Houses of Tiree – June Hill

Tiree, the most westerly of the islands that make up the Inner Hebrides, has in common with other Hebridean islands, a few thatched houses remaining. Those on Tiree, however, are unique.

I visited the island in April this year, and I was very disappointed to see that only five remained in good condition and another two or three were dilapidated or ruined. 15 years ago, there were twice as many and 18 in the 1980s. There is quite a valid reason for this, in that the thatch of marram grass needs replacing every three years, The marram grass is protected, and a license is required before it can be cut; a thatcher has to be sought on the mainland; and in all it costs about £8,000. Small wonder that those who live in them choose to cover the roofs in felt. However, the distinctive roof shape is kept, and it provides the opportunity to install roof lights and a second storey in the roof space. It is easy to spot those which have been thatched.

So, what makes the houses of Tiree unique? A description and a photograph may help. (See Fig.1)

Fig.1: House in Scarinish, the main settlement on Tiree, displaying all the features of a typical thatched house.

To begin with, they are small – two rooms, or three at the most. In plan, the door is central with the living room/kitchen on the right and the bedroom on the left. If there is a third room it is in the centre, behind a lobby, and was traditionally used to house the loom, as islanders produced tweed. Houses usually faced east, with their backs to the prevailing winds, which can reach up to 120mph. Internally rooms were only 13 feet from front to back. They were never blackhouses, where cattle were kept alongside humans in the house. Cattle were always housed in a separate barn built alongside the house. (See Fig.2)

Fig.2: Back (west) of a property, showing the bare stonework (only the front and chimneys are lime-washed) and the single chimney leaning away from the house. The small window lights the middle room.

Walls are up to 8 feet thick and only five or six feet high and consist of two sloping outer walls with sand providing the filling. The roof sits on the inner of these two walls, providing a ledge for grass and other vegetation to grow. Agile livestock (sheep and goats) graze it, dogs and people sit on it, flowers bloom in summer and rhubarb was grown on one! Water filters down into the sand, which acts like a wet suit, but the stones of the inner wall were tilted in an attempt to keep out the dampness. This technique is used elsewhere and is termed 'watershot'. Windows, usually one either side the door, were so deep inside the walls, that they were protected from the worst weather. In the past, glass was both expensive and hard to come by, and leather or even bundles of straw were used instead. There

Fig.3: Thatched house with barn attached. Animals were always kept separate from humans.

were windows on the west side too, so that wherever the wind came from, one could be opened.
There were usually two chimneys, one at either end, but often just one. These were canted away from the house, giving the thatch the best chance if sparks flew and falling away from the house if blown over. (See Fig.3 on previous page)
The roof was not attached to the house walls. Instead, evolution has taught the islanders over a few thousand years, that by cleverly constructing the roof so that the back slope is slightly shorter than the front, that wind pressure keeps it in place. Roofs are rounded and hipped. Wood was anciently brought over from the landlord's (the Duke of Argyll) woods beside Loch Sunart. Ropes weighted with stones keep the thatch in place. (See Fig.4)
Peat was burnt on the fires until about almost two hundred years ago, when coal was introduced. Central hearths in the middle of floors were remembered by someone elderly, living in the 1930s. The supply of peat was exhausted on Tiree by the 1830s and was sought on nearby Coll or Mull. Coal was subsequently shipped from the Ayrshire coalfield and necessitated chimneys rather than louvres. All the houses date from a land reorganisation of around 1800, but there is a long tradition behind them, and they are in every way, vernacular ▪

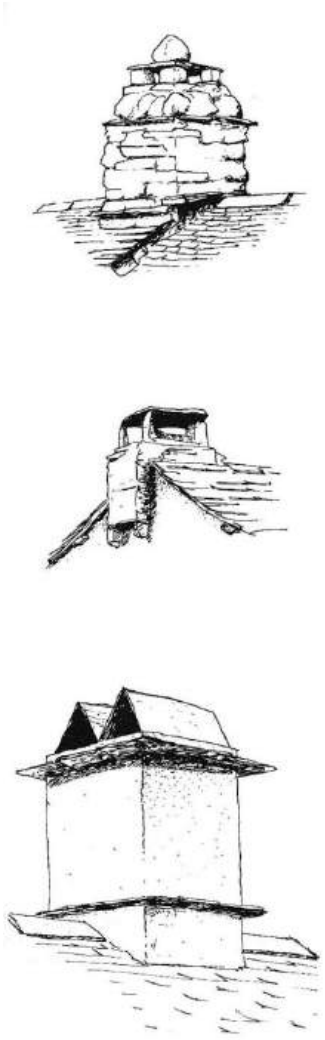
Fig.4: House revealing the roof timbers, in the process of renovation.

It is hoped that some of these unique houses can be saved for posterity. The island's museum, An Iodhlann, has a scale cut-away model of a thatched house, and although it is excellent, what a pity it would be if there were none left in the landscape.

4. The History and Vernacular Buildings of Troutbeck, Windermere

We met in the Village Hall and following refreshment there was a presentation by Paul Lewis which drew on the observations in a book from 1904 by Sir Samuel H. Scott called 'A Westmorland Village'. Scott wrote the book when he was 29; it covers the history and buildings of Troutbeck at that time and recounts stories of the old homesteads and 'statesman' families from the manuscripts of the Browne family who lived at Townend. A successful businessman he had a passion for topography and was an active philanthropist committed to conservation. His first involvement with the National Trust was to fund the purchase of Keld Chapel in Shap in 1918, he subsequently gave them land on the foreshore of Windermere and later along with his family the Glencoyne estate of 2,000 acres on Ullswater which he had bought in 1936 and where he had imposed restrictive covenants against development.

The area includes historical sites, a Neolithic Stone Circle, Romano British Settlement and Medieval Shielings in the vicinity of the Tongue which is north of Troutbeck Park Farm at the head of the valley. Significant dates: - the first mention of Troutbeck was in 1282, the early mainly timber framed buildings with walls of wattle, daub clay, turf or field stones have not survived. Many old buildings do remain in Troutbeck, the core however may be obscured by later building. By 1552 there were 72 customary tenants recorded in the village, statesmen (or Yeomen) with fairly wide variations in wealth and status but belonging to large family groups of some standing, the Birketts, Brownes, Longmires, Bensons and Birkett-Forrests amongst others. The resulting networks of the dominant families spread and are commemorated in various parts of the village. Plague had stuck the village in 1623-4. From the Mannex directory of 1849 and census of 1851 there were 60 who called themselves yeoman when the population of the Troutbeck township was 369.



Typical chimney styles seen in Troutbeck © Susan Denyer

Thomas Jeffrey's map of Windermere area 1770 shows the Trout beck (a spawning place for trout), roads and buildings along the valley at Troutbeck towards the Kirkstone Pass leading to Patterdale. We saw aerial footage taken by drone of the village layout; a linear shape with small enclosures around farms and larger open fields on the lower side of the valley. The village has no particular centre, its church (consecrated as Jesus Chapel 1562, rebuilt 1736) and school (1639, rebuilt 1853- now closed) which had to serve a large area are well away from the settlement and on the main road which by-passes it. It is one mile from Town End to High Green, the settlement is a series of hamlets following the spring-line, feeding

many wells, fountains & troughs with most building being on the sunny side of the valley. Narrow fell lanes and farm tracks converge from both sides of the valley to lead over the stream at Church Bridge. The extensive fell commons, enclosed 1842, were previously divided into three 'hundreds' each carrying 'a long hundred' (i.e.120) cattle gates.

We met in the Institute building (1869), the village hall, Paul's talk took the form of a 'Village Walk', illustrated by maps, house floor plans, photographs and old engravings of the area and vernacular buildings.

Low Fold Farm (1674) where we started our virtual tour is opposite to the Institute. The older part has a five-light oriel on wooden brackets overhanging the road, ventilation slots to the rear at the north end, a granary extension, drip course over windows and a curved stair outshut in the corner. The later house is to the left facing SE has a projecting corbelled chimney stack and a cupboard dated 1674; The Spinnery which is adjacent has a simple spinning gallery to the yard elevation on this former bank barn, accessed by a semicircular stone stair, the windows have wooden frames and mullions.

A map drawn by Blake Tyson for his article on 'Some Traditional Buildings in the Troutbeck Valley' CWAAS Transactions (NS) Vol. LXXXII shows this part of Troutbeck. The Low House group includes Low House Barn, Low House Farm North, a complex of barns and houses before reaching Thwaite, probably the original Low House farmhouse, and its L shaped barn. Thwaite is described in Chapter II "A Statesman's Home', of Scott's book on Troutbeck, drawing from various sources. Unoccupied probably from 1820 it was then used for farm storage until restoration as a habitable dwelling again in the 1980s. It was sketched by William Green of Ambleside in 1802, entitled 'A Farmhouse in
Troutbeck' and it remains very recognisable today. Its origins were as a 16th century single unit plan which has been extended in the 17th & 18th centuries and redeveloped since then. We will explore this more fully on our afternoon visit.

© Lewis Surveying Associates Ltd.

Paul then introduced the Townend Bank Barn, illustrated by rectified photographic images from Lewis Surveying Associates Ltd., the northern phase is a bank barn with two deep projecting wings, the canopy over the barn doors is extended to form a gallery; the barn is a rare surviving early example of its type. GBE (George & Ellinor Browne) 1666 is on a wooden lintel. A first floor plan shows the relation of the threshing floor to the granary in the left wing, the spinning gallery and winnowing

floor to the rear which has two smaller doors at either side. The cow byres were below. There are several unglazed mullioned windows. Timberwork of the gallery has been restored, some renewed but the original posts remain, there are some notches and a Gothic influence. A cart-house extension to the north has part of a cruck blade as a lintel. Across the road is Townend, probably the most important house in the village, this belongs to the National Trust. Originally a single unit plan house for George Browne who married Susannah Rawlinson of Grizedale Hall in 1623. A bower and other extensions followed. An afternoon visit of the property will explore the development and layout of the house. Paul had personal involvement in the conservation challenges in recent years. Following a survey of 2015 timber decay in lintels was discovered. There were bubbles in the layers of lime wash on the render of the wall above the fireroom & urgent remedial work was required A major engineering exercise followed involving scaffolding, replacing lintels and rebuilding stonework. The removal of render provided more information on the structure of the house such as an old fire hood and changes to doors & windows. A lead counterweight was found hidden in a wall by the door of the original cross-passage, possibly by the family as a protection against witches. An authentic mix of replacement render was identified from analysis of samples and redecoration to original colours using EM examination of layers of paint. The white lime wash layers have been applied with many coats and the doors and window frames are now repainted in an earlier wine red colour as being historically accurate. In 1615 the second of eight George Brownes angered the manorial Lord, King James I, over his weir at Limefitt Mill which was impeding movement of trout & salmon to and from Lake Windermere. He fought a case against the King to deny him a right to fish in the river. As 'statesman farmers', the more successful and affluent customary tenants, the Brownes were a well-off family and after the Enclosure Act of 1842 through an Award they increased their land holding to 734 acres with allotments at Woundale. We saw elevations & map plan for the Hoghouse which was located by the Woundale beck. The twelve generations of Brownes going back to Elizabethan times had been great collectors including of books but also correspondence, wills, letters, diaries and receipts forming a great archive of social history. Much of this history is stored in the Cumbrian archives, from among archived papers Paul found examples of building terminology of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Thwaite Barn © John McDowell

The talk concluded with a visit to the head of the valley. Troutbeck Park Quarries of 1754 lay NNE of the village and led to population increase in the late 19th century through the slate trade, this was an important but fluctuating market, the quarries are now disused. The massive Troutbeck Park estate of Thomas Burningham with its hunting park of nearly 2000 acres (c.f. George Browne of Town End with 735 acres); by the 17th century it was owned by the Phillipson family of Calgarth Hall and William Birkett was a mid-17th century tenant. In 1923 it was bought and farmed by Mrs Heelis, Beatrix Potter; extending from the dale and the Tongue to Froswick, Ill Bell & Thornthwaite Crag, it was given by her to the National Trust. The farmhouse of Troutbeck Park Farm is the last house in the valley, a large and complex late 17th century farmhouse with an attached bank barn on one side and a two-storey cottage on the other. It is an L shaped main house; the rear kitchen has a spiral stair with a very tall chimney and later rear additions are of two phases. A Victorian refit replaced most internal doors and fireplaces. It was built in slate with a rendered front and has a drip-course above ground floor windows.


Troutbeck Park Farm © John McDowell

There are other hamlets in Troutbeck which include Cragg, Longmire Yeat, High Green and Townhead, Scott's book has 2 chapters entitled 'A View of Troutbeck' which cover Townfoot to The Cragg and Mid-town to Townhead. Another more recent walking account is Brunskill's Vernacular Trail of Troutbeck which can be found in his 'Traditional Buildings of Cumbria' book, many of the other buildings of interest and findings are noted there ▪

CVBG Visit to Townend House, Troutbeck

Our afternoon began at Townend, the group gathered on a gravelled courtyard area in front of the farmhouse for an introduction to our visit from Emma Wright, the Collections and House Manager, of this National Trust property. A NT property since 1948, there is coverage in the BBC production 'Hidden Treasures of the NT' (series 3, episode 2) available on iPlayer. The property has been presented as it was in the late 19th century. Emma reiterated what Paul detailed earlier concerning conservation work done on replacing outer timber lintels and we saw the freshly reinstated red-brown paint to woodwork with a background of the white lime-washed stonework.

The Brownes, a sheep farming family, have lived in Troutbeck for 500 years. Yeoman/Statesman farmers of middle society rather than gentry, twelve generations of Brownes have lived at Townend. Originally a one roomed farmhouse Townend was rebuilt by 1650 commencing with the Fire House. Viewing the front elevation, we saw the central Fire House with the Downhouse (mid-late 17th

century) to its right, a small window indicating where the front entrance to the cross-passage had been originally and which ran through to a door at the back. Uphill on the left an 18th century cross-wing projects forward and when constructed a new entrance with a pentice-roof was made directly into the Fire House in this corner. The visitor entrance today is into the Kitchen/Downhouse through a porch shared with the 19th century Dairy/Wash House which is to the right and in front of the older building. The Downhouse has an inglenook fireplace with adjustable ratten crooks to hang pots and pans above the fire, an iron plate or backstone for cooking oatcakes above a firebox which has a separate flue on one side of the main flue. There are two fire windows and many carved wooden fittings in this kitchen. At the rear there is a half spiral stair, blocks of oak tenoned in to a faceted newel-post from the Mell to the upper floor, this floor is partitioned into 3 small servants bedrooms; one room gives access to the meat loft above the fireplace, meat was hung here in the smoke to dry and be preserved. Two meal-arks, or kists, originally for storage of malted barley are here and converted to wardrobes for the housekeeper's bedroom. Space above this area, the felon's loft, was accessed by a ladder and used to hold criminals prior to trial when Old Ben (father of another Ben) or George Browne were High Constables; male servants also slept in this loft.

The abandoned Hallan was converted into a pantry when the Downhouse became the kitchen, there are a few steps up into the Fire House. Here the great hooded hearth canopy for the large open-hearth fire was adapted for coal burning by the addition of two freestone hobs with a grate suspended between them, the smoke channelled within stone surrounds beneath the firebeam into the existing hood. A bee-hive shaped brick bread oven was inserted into the back wall of the fire in 1727 but is no longer visible, having been removed or masked by the later iron ranges when a Gothic chimney piece was installed around 1842. The spice cupboard to the right and a press to the left installed in 1672 remain. A press cupboard stored pewter & silver as well as a batch of clapbread. There is a slate floor. Polished oak predominates in nearly every room, the panelling in this 17th century room is of the 1670s but was brought to Townend at a later date, there is a long oak board table for both family and servants. The head of the family sat at its head, men sat with their backs to the windows and women opposite on benches. The last George Browne's embellished furniture includes chairs and a court cupboard with bogus coats of arms.

CVBG Members gather for the tour of Townend © John McDowell

There is a late 17th century extension behind the fireroom, built after the fourth George Browne married around 1672, it houses the main staircase and the library with a collection of 1,331 books. Originally used as a downstairs bedroom (bower/sleeping-parlour), the carved oak bedstead is now upstairs. The staircase is

of the 17th century but may have been installed much later being grander than the house & misleading in that it rises as if to a second storey, a small space in the attic. Upstairs above the library is a State Bedroom where there is a cradle, accurately dated to 1670; another small bedroom was used for extended family & is now a picture room or exhibition space. The Main Bedroom is over the Fire House and overlooks the courtyard and garden, the floor slopes up from the door. There is carved decorative detail on the 17th century bed, mirror & fire-surround. A small Blue Bedroom has a linen cupboard, perhaps the position of an earlier staircase from the Fire House and a former office area with an un-level oak board floor fixed in place with pegs. The upper rooms are partitioned with plank-and-muntin panelling.

Scott's book on Troutbeck of 1904 gives a clear description of Townend which was termed 'a very good mansion house' two centuries before, for both the ground plan but also of the furnishings and details of the Browne family. A fascinating inventory of the effects of Old Ben in 1731 at Townend lists the furnishings at that time, here are some examples for the various rooms: 'The House (one skreen or Long Settle), the Parlour (one stand or cupboard of Drawers), the Little room over the Parlour (one wainscott Chest), the Great Room (two Rushia Leather Chairs), my room over the House (one Buroe), the New Room and Closet over the entry (one table with drawer at each end), the Low Loft & little Room adjoining (two meal Chests), the Kitching (three Kettles), Butteries (32 Pewter Dishes), Skullery (one Cupboard), Milkhouse (stone Tables), Cellar (Beef Tubb and Guilefatt) and Miln Loft (two great Arks)'.

Downhouse kitchen © John McDowell

Seen from the courtyard there are six towering chimneys, square stacks which change to a tapered cylinder with inclined slates as a chimney pot on top; two are on corbelled projections from gable walls. There is a reset stone externally: GB 1626.

The Brownes were collectors from Elizabethan to Victorian times; the conservation team has ongoing challenges with the property, the garden, in the care of the books and their bindings and the other paper records which form a huge, archived resource. The books cover the family's wide range of interests including farming, architecture, politics, medicine and local history. Many household implements are displayed, also an interesting pottery and 18th century drinking glass collection. (See image)

© John McDowell

Cottage-garden style planting follows the Victorian design of the courtyard area, there is a sundial of 1766. From this garden in front of the farmhouse there are good views of the front elevation of the Bank Barn just over the road.

Bank Barn

The barn is private and not open to the public. We took a closer look at the features detailed by Paul in his talk which were visible from the roadside. Of slate and stone construction, the projecting wings, the ramp with 2 dog hulls below, the Gothic style oak woodwork of the spinning gallery, harr-hung barn doors and wooden windows in particular. The carved oak wooden lintel of 1666 over a lower window on the downhill projecting wing is protected by sacking. The group then made its way the short distance north to visit Thwaite among the Low House group of buildings ▪

John McDowell

Thwaite, formerly Low House Farm
A 16th century farmhouse in Troutbeck

The Low House Group comprises;
Low House
Low House Barn
Birkett House and barn
Thwaite Barn
Thwaite

As with all of the older buildings in Troutbeck, the above in The Low House Group were built along a spring line in an area previously used as a medieval hunting forest. Whilst all of these buildings are of historical interest and below, a brief mention of them, particular focus has been on the house, previously part of the Low House Farm and now known as Thwaite.

Low House is notable for its corbelled chimney stacks on the cross-wings, one dated 1627 and the other 1811 and also for its gallery between the two wings. A bread cupboard inside the building is dated 1634. The pink paintwork is traditional, a mix of haematite and limewash.

Low House Barn situated just 'seven yards' from Low House (date unknown) suffered a serious fire in 1757. It was at this time owned by a Mr Jona. Birkhead. One of his cousins, William Birkett describes in a letter his findings when he went to assess the damage. Two bays ('the low end') were burnt, with the damage amounting to 'near 15 pounds'…'the stones mouldered and broken by the heat.' Doubting that

much could be rescued from the fire it was a relief to find that 'no grain was lost.'- Extracts from CWAAS Transactions Vol LXXX11, 1982.

Birkett House and barn, to the west of Thwaite across the courtyard is a large house, appearing to be of a considerably later date than those around it. It has an early barn attached to it with very well-preserved crow stepped gables and wrestler ridge. Could the core of Birkett House be much older than it appears?

Thwaite Barn opposite Thwaite (house) is L shaped and dates from C18 and early C19. It is a bank barn and clearly shows the different phases of building, remaining in very good condition. A small triangular shaped roof provides shelter to an entrance in the right-angled corner formed by the L shape. The openings in the walls clearly reflect the different phases. Inside, there are many original features including, a shippon (cow house) at ground floor level, slate boskins (a large slate set within a wooden surround to form a partition) and a well-preserved cobbled floor. Wooden partitions and hay racks remain in the stables.

Thwaite (formerly Low House Farm)

Described as a Yeoman's or Statesman's Home, a building has been on this site since around the mid C16. Standing in an area which was once medieval hunting forest and there at the time of the death of James 1, this is clearly an early building. Observed by S H Scott, author in 1904 of 'A Westmorland Village' he describes it as 'an old house long since deserted. Its broken lines of roof are very picturesque and may be taken as a typical example as an old Troutbeck house.'

S H Scott, described the buildings in Troutbeck very clearly: 'The walls of these houses are built of the grey stone from the nearest quarry, not hewn, squared or pointed, but roughly split and skilfully laid so that very little mortar is required. The roofs are of green slate from the Applethwaite Fells; the gables sometimes stepped with heavy slabs of stone as a protection against the storms of winter.'

Originally a single unit plan, a remnant of a cruck blade found in the East wall of the oldest part of the building suggests a cruck frame structure on this site. Many changes have taken place over the centuries, including extensions to the house during the C17 and C18, with some 'gentrification.'

Despite the changes made to the building, Thwaite became unoccupied from the early 1800s. From 1820 it became a farm store, principally 'wood and coals.' This use of the building continued until it came into the hands in 1956 of Mr and Mrs Elias as part of the Low House estate. The family remember exploring the 'old house,'

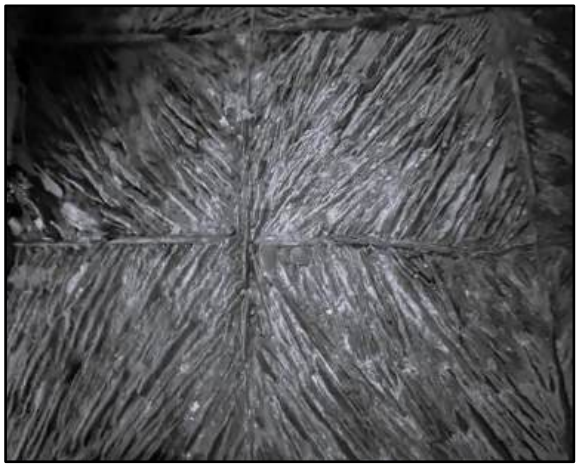
negotiating the lack of upper-level floors! In 1981 they sought listed building consent to restore the building and on appeal, permission was granted for this to take place. Earlier findings were many and included plank and muntin partitions and wooden mullion windows. A fireplace suitable for peat burning and possibly a peat store behind a blocked door were also found. The style of chimneys suggested earlier smoke hoods and remains of a hood exist in a bedroom in the gable end. A long drop 'privy' at the back of the house allowed for disposal of waste and is still there.

Whilst changes to windows and doors at the front of the house are evident, the different phases of the house and alterations are more noticeable in the rear elevation. A section of wall with a boulder plinth indicates the earlier phase and changes are visible in the blocked and altered openings and the joins in the walls. Now with a roof of graded slates and a wrestler ridge, it's possible that the earliest part of the building to the north was originally lower with a steeper pitch and thatched roof. It's also possible that previously the building may have been lime rendered. The outline of a now blocked rear entrance to an earlier cross passage is also clear to see.

Returning to the front of the house, the main entrance from the courtyard leads into the opposite end of that earlier cross passage or hallan. The entrance passes through a wide two -storey porch, on either side of which earlier stone seats are now used for log storage. Brunskill suggests that the substantial, slightly arched lintel at the front of this porch may be a reused cruck blade ('Traditional Buildings of Cumbria' and' Vernacular Buildings of the Lake Counties'). The oak boarded ceiling of the porch is supported by substantial oak timbers, and a fine, very wide early oak door (now with an inner modern oak framed, partially glazed door) leads into the house. The studs, latch and repairs to the old door all suggest considerable age, as does the way it is hung. What appear to be draw-bar holes are evident in the oak frame. According to S H Scott's 'A Westmorland Village,' the day before market day, sacks of corn were placed in the hallan, and slaughtered pigs were hung there. A door at the right-hand end of the hallan led into a down-house which had been used as a cart shed whilst the building was being used for storage. It was only one storey and open to the rafters. A door at the left-hand side of the hallan led into the 'mell' or short passage screened off from the room by the heck, a short partition projecting into the room. This usually supported the first beam in the ceiling and was made from stone or wood. A further door at the end of the hallan and opposite the front door led out into the garden, but as previously mentioned, this is now blocked. This arrangement has now changed considerably as passage walls have gone and what would have

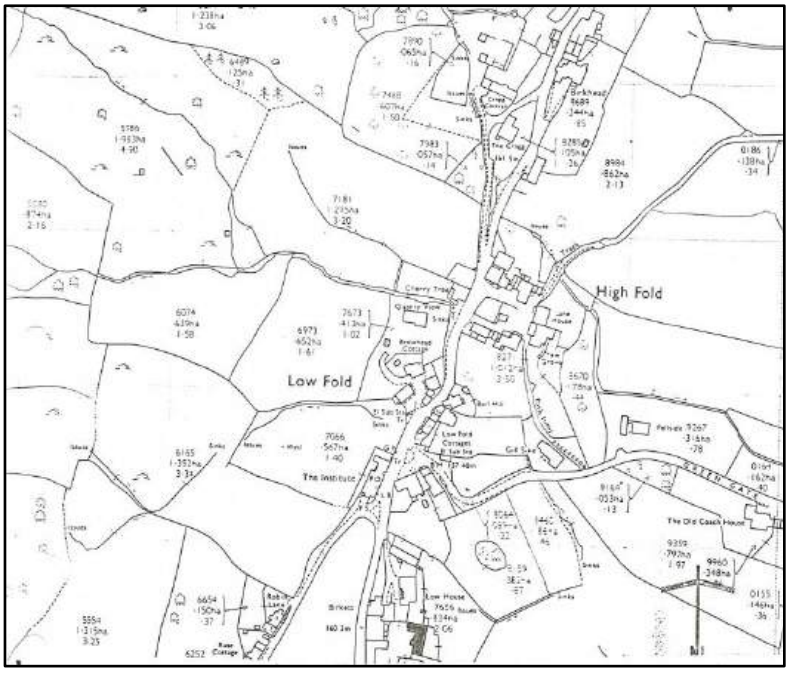
been the downhouse is now an open space with gallery above. Further accommodation to the left of the hallan or earlier passage, includes a sitting room and a study in what had been the bower (usually a panelled room which would have been the bedroom of the 'master and mistress-always downstairs) and a kitchen in the wing. 'Bedrooms and a bathroom complete the upper floor accommodation.

The building is now in new hands, and the interior of the house continues to retain many fascinating features, including the sensitively restored or replaced early mullion windows, the previously mentioned plank and muntin partitions and remains of some plaster mouldings. Early broad oak floorboards and slate flagstones have been used when available or sourced appropriately. An intriguing section of original flooring at the foot of the stairs has been made by placing small slates diagonally on their ends within a square, each completed square then placed against others with opposite facing diagonal arrangements (see photograph). A nearby door leads downwards via steep, stone steps into a small cellar, still with slate slabs and a stone flagged floor. A three-pane mullion window looks out onto the garden at the rear, almost at ground level. Interestingly, S H Scott refers to two cellars beneath the 'dairy and best bedroom' but of a second cellar, there is no sign!



Grateful thanks were given to the owner, Lizzie Faithful Davies for her hospitality. As work continues on this fascinating and unique house its future will be further protected as its grading changes from Grade II to Grade II* status ▪

Text and Images by Stephanie Hewison



Troutbeck area as mentioned in this article © Mike Turner & LDNPA

5. The Historic Yards of Penrith- A Presentation by Sheila Fletcher Quaker Meeting House, Monday 19th May 2025

Local Historian Sheila Fletcher developed her interest in the yards of Penrith over more recent years, and she has given many talks on this subject. We were delighted to welcome her to share her knowledge with us and also to give us a tour of some of the remaining and accessible yards of the town.

Penrith is at an important intersection in the north of England and is steeped in history. As it grew during medieval times, rows of cottages would have been built, each with its own burgage plot behind for cultivation and perhaps to rear animals. Sheila showed us a later map of the town, dated around 1790 by James Clarke and the layout was still clear to see. Markets also began to appear in open spaces in the town; a charter to hold markets was granted by Henry III as early as 1223. Along with the markets selling grain and livestock, and in common with other market towns such as Appleby, an area known as the Shambles was established where animals were slaughtered and skinned. Produce such as eggs and farm produce were also sold in the town in Middlegate and Devonshire Street. Hiring fairs also took place in Devonshire Street.

Increasing numbers of people came to Penrith to live and to pass through and as travel increased, so did the demands on the inns. More stabling and coach houses were built as well as accommodation for working people usually behind the existing buildings and between 1688 and 1801 the population increased from 1,350 to 3,801. These new properties were often exceedingly small (two or three rooms), some with workshops and were crowded together. This resulted in a lot of the plots behind the houses gradually being built over, with buildings clustered around yards. Facilities were often shared with other large families and were extremely limited, for example a night soil container, a midden for rubbish and minimal washing facilities. People lived together cooperatively and harmoniously and earned a living. Their homes could be accessed via narrow passages from the streets and some show that means of security were incorporated, for example draw bar holes allowing an entrance to be barricaded. Names for these passages to their yards developed; these were often named after a nearby inn (for example Old crown Yard) or after the owner of the house or land beside or through which the passage passed.

Occasionally the yards were named after someone's occupation, for example Shearman's Yard, possibly after a well-known sheep shearer. Other occupations included for example, blacksmiths, coachmen, coal agents as well as those with trades in leather and cloth. Occasionally a tool of someone's trade would be visible on a sign at the entrance to a yard.

The quality of these rapidly built small houses and workshops was not always good, with tiny windows and sewerage disposal virtually non-existent. The upper floor was often accessed by an external stair (still visible in White Hart Yard and Three Crowns Yard) and 'flying freehold' (when part of one property extends over or under another person's property boundary) was quite common in such confined spaces. Over time, in some yards, conditions were reported by the Local Board of Health as being 'filthy and insanitary', resulting in houses being demolished.
Some yards however were built with a more open aspect as was Scott Yard in Corney Place. It was occupied over the years by many families and people with very wide-ranging professions and was a very different place to live from some of the dark, cramped yards. Arnison's Yard, described as 'extensive in the past' was filled with buildings and gardens. It had also been the site of a cock fighting pit which was made illegal in 1835.

Many of the yards in Penrith have now gone but around 52 remain. Whilst a lot of the above-mentioned small houses are still in these yards, some with original features, many have been modernised, upgraded and extended. In some cases, new houses have been built. Some of the yards can still be accessed but most are now private property with access only for residents. It was fascinating to be able to visit some of the accessible yards with Sheila and to have the benefit of her extensive knowledge as we walked around.

The yards continue to be a key part of the older streets of Penrith where earlier buildings remain and are testament to an important part of its social and economic history.

Many thanks to Sheila for her most interesting talk and walkabout. Her leaflet 'Historic Yards of Penrith' is very informative and includes a self-guided walking tour and further information on 24 yards. Sheila has also contributed to the recently published 'PENRITH A Few Yards of Interest' by Carol Mitchell. This is beautifully illustrated, predominantly by local artist Barbara Hitch with other paintings by Rosemary Koch-Osborne ▪

Stephane Hewison

6. CVBG visit to Shepherd's Hill Malthouse, Penrith Monday, 19th May 2025

Tucked away out of sight in a busy part of Penrith is a rare Grade II * listed industrial vernacular building, the Malthouse, Shepherd's Hill. It is the only one of its type in the North of England. CVBG Chairman Paul Lewis has been involved in the surveying of this fragile building and conservation work for its future alongside structural engineers.

The building could date from the late C18 and would for many years have been a hive of industry, providing malt for the nearby brewery. A constant, artificial supply of water through the grounds has been available from Thacka Beck via a culvert from the River Petteril, about 2 miles north of Penrith. A plaque near an open part of the culvert near the Tourist Information Centre in Penrith states;
'*Thacka Beck was Penrith's first water supply, created by Bishop Strickland about the year 1400.*' The plaque goes on to say that the amount of water taken '*was determined by as much water as would constantly run through the eye of a millstone.*'

Whilst the associated brewery was shown on early maps of Penrith, by 1923 all sign of it had gone as more modern mechanised processes created a death knell for the industry. The malthouse however remained, becoming increasingly fragile over the decades.

From the outside, the malthouse appears to be quite a plain sandstone building, with one half slightly lower than the other. A square louvred ventilator sits on the ridge of the taller part of the building. The roof materials are a mismatch in that one side is covered with sandstone flags and the other side with slates. Whilst there are only a small number of existing window openings, some finely designed metal shutters are in place.

Entering the taller section of the building, the soaking pit for the grain (in this case barley) is just inside the door and is approximately a metre deep. The grain would be put in the pit and it would remain steeped in water until it only just began to germinate. It would then be spread out for germination to continue further on an unheated open floor. At this stage and now known as green malt, it would be moved into the kiln room and laid out to dry (where the furnace, with its cast iron doors is still in place). The fine intersecting brick arches form a striking vaulted ceiling in this room and these would have supported the drying floor above the furnace, with the temperature controlled by ventilation. We saw examples of perforated

clay tiles which would have been used to make up the drying floor and allow heat to pass evenly through to the malt.

By this stage, germination would have halted and the malt would be stabilised and ready for brewing. It would then be moved to the loading dock, probably hand shovelled, and onwards to the nearby brewery. The remains of the hoist at the loading dock is still in place at the top of external stairs and a small two paned window inside lights the area. A substantial piece of oak is also visible on the inside which would have acted as a counter balance whilst the hoist was in use.

During the visit to this very interesting building, we were unable to visit the first floor, either because of its rather perilous state or because sections of flooring are no longer there. A big split in a principal rafter is an added consideration.
Whilst the external walls are generally in good condition, a combination of missing floors, a heavy timber roof structure and one side of the roof weighing a lot more than the other (because of the sandstone flags), have all contributed to some bulging in the walls. Unfortunately, some small movement has also been discovered in the kiln room.

Moving forward, the owner is continuing to work to stabilise the structure and ensure the building is completely watertight, whist structural engineers are visually monitoring outwards movement in the rear wall. Perhaps at some point in the future, living accommodation may be possible in the kiln end of the building.
Paul thanked the owner Benjamin Smith for the opportunity for us to visit such an interesting and unusual building ▪

Text and Images by Stephanie Hewison

7. The Vernacular Architecture Group Spring Conference 2025 South Wiltshire report by Justin Wood.

Enjoying CVBG events, what would it be like 'exploring the vernacular' further afield? Two Westmorlanders attended their first national Vernacular Architecture Group (VAG, www.vag.org.uk) Spring Conference; the focus in April 2025, South Wiltshire. With rural and medieval town timber-frame and cruck building structures being somewhat different to typical Cumbrian examples, what would a VAG study tour entail?

Some 60+ VAG members attended, of which five were CVBG members, with a scattering from other Northern counties. The Wiltshire Buildings Record (WBR; www.wiltshirebuildingsrecord.org.uk) organised the event, their Conference Team deserving huge credit. The event, held across five days, was outstanding, superbly run and planned. An extensive 68-page guidebook was excellent; plans, images and descriptions, detailed in depth buildings and localities visited. Daily schedules (by minibus on narrow lanes, small coach, on foot in Salisbury), were timed to perfection. Homeowners and tenants were kind and delighted to share the history of their remarkable properties, well chosen for variation and integrity. Historic Salisbury Cathedral Close, the largest in Britain, was the Conference base, with accommodation, meals and evening lectures held within the Grade I Sarum College.

VAG Conference guidebook description of Wiltshire vernacular:

'Wiltshire's usual medieval house plan is 3-room and cross-passage with a 1-bay or 2-bay open hall… C14 post and truss houses gradually supersede crucks, whose construction had petered out by the end of the C15… timber framing is normally square panels… thatch the usual roof covering, traditionally long straw'. The South is 'Chalk Country', the North 'Cheese', sheep grazing on water meadows and arable fields, contrasted with cattle and pastoral farming. 'Salisbury is the most successful of [England's] medieval planned towns… the new cathedral was in the Early English style…' Grand houses were built within the Close; 'the new town was laid out from 1220, designed in an irregular grid of "Chequers" in tenement plots… with a comprehensive network of mid street waterways'.
(source: WBR, 2025)

Afternoon 1 brought attendees together to register, settle into rooms, dine, and attend the evening talk. Three days were then spent visiting a variety of properties that exhibited differing medieval building styles and use over time. Days 2 & 3 focused on buildings scattered within river valleys to the W & NW of Salisbury, upper chalk downs and Salisbury plain open pasture. Around six buildings were visited daily: C14-16th thatched timber-framed farmhouses with cross-passages and differing numbers of bays, manor houses, open hall, C13-15th Great Barns, a church, inn, and working malthouse. Day 4, the morning was spent visiting affluent expansive domestic medieval brick or stone properties, typically Grade I, within within the old city. Day 5 provided the opportunity for a 90-minute morning tour exploring the roof of Salisbury Cathedral, ascending the tower and entering the spire. Evening lectures covered Wiltshire vernacular architecture, building stones, Old Sarum, the development of medieval Salisbury, Pevsner in Wiltshire, the roof of Salisbury cathedral. Lively discussion followed on from visits.

As newcomers, with long days meticulously planned (breakfast at 07.00, lunch provided, dinner at 18.30, evening lecture at 20.15,) we returned to our room come 22.00 exhausted. Just how did the wider group manage? Whether 28 or 82, folks seemed able to rise at 06.00, examine every beam joint, feature, wall, and building puzzle, discuss non-stop and still prop up the bar until midnight. Did we feel out of our depth? Only the once, the first evening lecture, in describing 'cruck beams, cruck and more cruck', bringing a feel of 'just where are we'? Of course, we could not have been made more welcome; one knowledgeable attendee was on their 62nd Spring conference! You appreciated the quiet, supportive, informative discussions within your daily group.

As happens with special interest groups, many are more than happy to share knowledge - whether national leads, academics, professionals, authors, dendrochronologists, longstanding members of regional groups, or interested amateurs.

As well as 'seeing' a new region, with its own vernacular building styles and materials, what particularly appealed was where evidence within a building differed by room or floor, or personal experiences brought alternative interpretations of the historic development of properties. Two examples demonstrate this:

A: An early C16th former farmhouse with long outshut under a catslide thatch roof, originally comprising four internal bays, with former cross passageway, was likely originally built as a 1½ storey timber framed building. Were the outer walls originally rubblestone, or formerly of wooden panelling? The living room has a (probable) early C17th stone built smoke bay; above the hearth is a wooden beam which on examination comprises two sections of wood side by side, a clear divide between. Group discussion, mulling over, brought one firm verdict, that the farmhouse had originally been smaller and timber clad. The hearth beam identified where the original outer wall had been; later the room was extended outwards and upwards, the current stone smoke bay, with exterior stone walls added. Whilst all were content, study days were part spent downstairs, part upstairs; the loft left experienced conference goers pondering. Visible along the roof length were 'unaltered tenoned and pegged cambered collar trusses'; these ran the full length of the farmhouse. Evidence on the ground floor did not match that of the loft; two floors up, it seemed that the farmhouse had always had a stone hearth and smoke bay (this need not mean the entire outer walls were originally stone clad?).

B: Was a remarkable surviving Great Barn, bays separated by 12 raised cruck trusses, tree-ring dated to the late C13th, originally built with its present rubble stone walls, or was it timber-framed (suggested by a 'surviving pegged cruck spur')? The bottoms of the wooden crucks were positioned into masonry corbels, built part way

up the wall; one of these corbels, along with its accompanying beam, was designed at an angle, fitted together smoothly to fit the beam; crucks appeared naturally in place, since first built. One Westmorlander queried why barn end stone walls did not have crucks if it had originally been an all-wood structure. The Group interpretation was somewhat unanimous; this Great Barn had been built of rubble stone, cruck bases and corbels original.

What a delightful, fascinating event and group. Stirling welcomes VAG in June 2026; we may see you there? ▪

Dr Justin Wood

- Further Reading -

Pevsner. Wiltshire. 1963; revised 2021.
Slocombe. WBR publications: Wiltshire farmhouses, cottages, farm buildings, etc.
Chandler. 1983. Endless Street. A history of Salisbury and its people.
Cook and Langland. 2024. Tales of two cities. Settlement and Suburb in Old Sarum and Salisbury.
Harding. 2022. Joining the Dots: uniting Salisbury's past through holes in the ground.

CVBG Members browse the downhouse kitchen at Townend
© John McDowell