

ART. X. – *Peat Storage Huts in Eskdale.*

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ALTHOUGH neither as extensive nor as deep as the blanket peat cover of many other parts of upland Britain, peat deposits on the flatter parts of the Lake District fells were of sufficient extent¹ to form an important element in the traditional farming economy of the area by providing a source of fuel for the hearth of farmhouse and cottage alike. Indeed, the remnants of ancient woodland in the Lake District had come to be jealously guarded, primarily for charcoal production, by the 16th century² and many Lakeland communities relied heavily on peat as a source of fuel until improvements in communications in the Industrial Revolution made coal more easily available. In many parts of the Lake District this aspect of the traditional way of life has left few marks on the landscape today: a track leading from the valley bottom to the now almost imperceptible peat diggings often provides the only physical reminder of the former practice. In Eskdale, however, the fellsides are scattered with the remains of small dry-stone huts (known as “peat scales”) in which peat was dried and stored. A survey of these peat storage huts in Eskdale was undertaken in August 1982, with the help of a small group of American volunteers, recruited by the Earthwatch organization of Belmont, Massachusetts, as part of a project organized by the Brathay Centre for Exploration and Field Studies. The aim of this paper is to report the findings of this survey and to discuss the documentary evidence which throws light on former peat-cutting practices in Eskdale.

Field Survey

Thirty-five peat storage huts were identified on the fellsides surrounding Eskdale, upstream from Eskdale Green. The structures were identified initially from Ordnance Survey aerial photographs³ and from first edition Ordnance Survey 1:2,500 plans, surveyed in 1860.⁴ A measured sketch plan of each hut was made from field observations and detailed plans were prepared for selected huts (see Fig. 3). The location of the huts is shown in Fig. 1 and a summary of the information concerning each structure is given in Appendix I.

The thirty-five huts are scattered along the valley sides, usually near the marked break in slope between the peat-yielding plateau, which occurs at *c.* 300 m. (900–1,000 ft.) above sea level on both sides of the valley, and the steep drop down to the valley floor. Most huts lie on unenclosed common land but five are in fellside pastures within the intake wall. In many cases they have been built beside carefully graded sledge tracks, which zig-zag up the fellsides to the peat deposits. The largest concentration is the cluster of nine huts on Boot Bank at the head of the track from Boot to the peat mosses on Longrigg, and smaller groups are associated with other tracks, notably that climbing from Penny Hill to Kepple Crag (see Fig. 1).

The huts were simple, rectangular, dry-stone structures, built of readily obtained granite rubble. Their external dimensions were of the order of 4.5–6.5 m. by 3.5–5.5 m. In one case (no. 31 on Fig. 1) two huts appeared to have been built

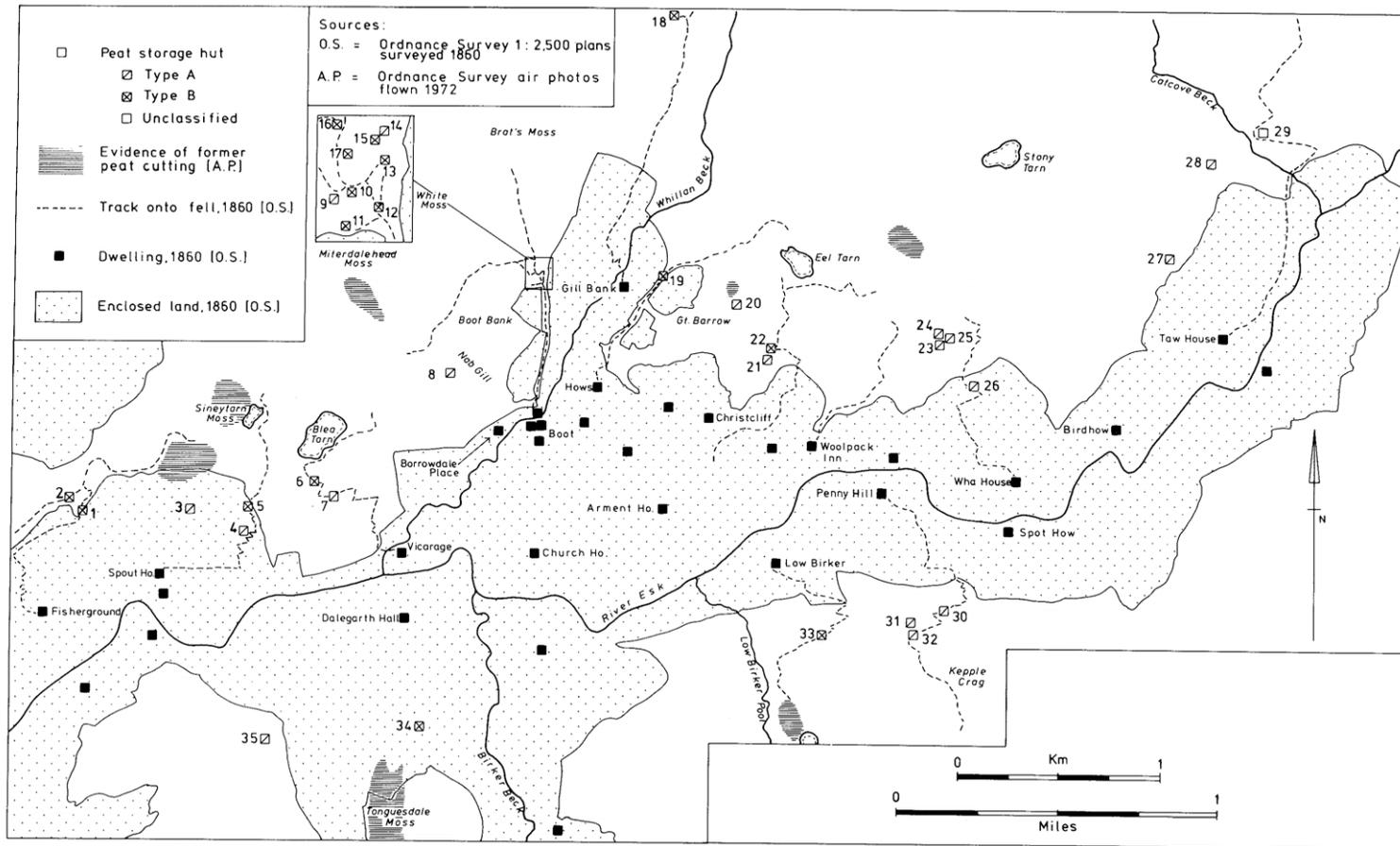


FIG. 1. - Features associated with peat cutting in Eskdale.

together, sharing a common dividing wall. That they were originally roofed structures is indicated by the evidence of gables in almost all cases.

It was immediately apparent that there were two contrasting types of peat storage hut in the valley (see Fig. 2). One (henceforth termed Type A) was a simple, low hut with a gable height of *c.* 2.5 m., built on a level patch of ground, and having one entrance. The other (Type B) was akin to the familiar "bank barn" of the Lake District in that it was built into the hillside in such a way that it had two entrances, an upper doorway on the uphill side, often approached by an elaborately constructed ramp or platform, and a lower entrance on the downhill side. The Type B huts were generally much more substantial structures than those of Type A.

A total of eighteen huts could be classified as belonging to Type A. It was striking, first, that all the huts in the upper reaches of the valley (above the Woolpack Inn on the north and Penny Hill on the south) fell into this category and second, that, while nearly all the Type B huts lay on or very close to well-made sledge tracks, eight of the Type A huts were not associated with an obvious track. The Type A huts appear to have gone out of use by the mid 19th century. With one exception (no. 9 on Fig. 1) none was shown as a roofed structure on the first edition Ordnance Survey plans of 1860 (indeed, seven were not marked at all), and it was striking that (again with the one exception) none bore evidence of having had a slate roof (*i.e.* no fragments of roofing slate were found). It is likely that they were roofed with bracken thatch, the traditional roofing material in the Eskdale area before the early 18th century.⁵ In several cases (nos. 4, 20, 24, 28) the foundations of rectangular structures were visible close to surviving huts, implying that some at least of the Type A huts were built on the sites of still earlier huts on the fellsides.

The sixteen Type B huts were both more elaborate and arguably of later date than those of Type A. As noted, they were nearly all associated with well-made sledge tracks and several had stone-built ramps leading to their upper doorways and levelled areas in front of their lower entrances. In most cases there was evidence of a slate roof and, with three exceptions (nos. 6, 12, and 34), each structure of this type was shown as roofed (and presumably then, or recently, in use) on the Ordnance Survey plans of 1860. In three cases a Type B hut is paired with a Type A hut on a track up to the mosses, suggesting that the Type B hut was built to replace the earlier hut nearby. Thus hut no. 4 may have been superseded by no. 5; no. 7 by no. 6; and no. 21 by no. 22 (see Fig. 1).

The results of field observation and an examination of the earliest Ordnance Survey maps allow some tentative conclusions to be drawn. A change from low, thatched peat storage huts to the more elaborate "bank-barn" type of hut seems to have taken place at some time before 1860. The change to a more substantial type of hut may have been associated with the construction of durable, graded sledge tracks up to the peat mosses, and it may also have been related to a concentration of peat-digging in the extensive mosses between Blea Tarn and Burnmoor on the north and around Low Birker Pool and Tonguesdale Moss in the south. The absence of the later type of storage hut from the upper reaches of the valley may indicate that the smaller deposits of peat in that area had ceased to be worked (or had been worked out) by the date of the change of building style.

Documentary and Oral Evidence

That the structures on the fellsides described above were indeed huts for the storage

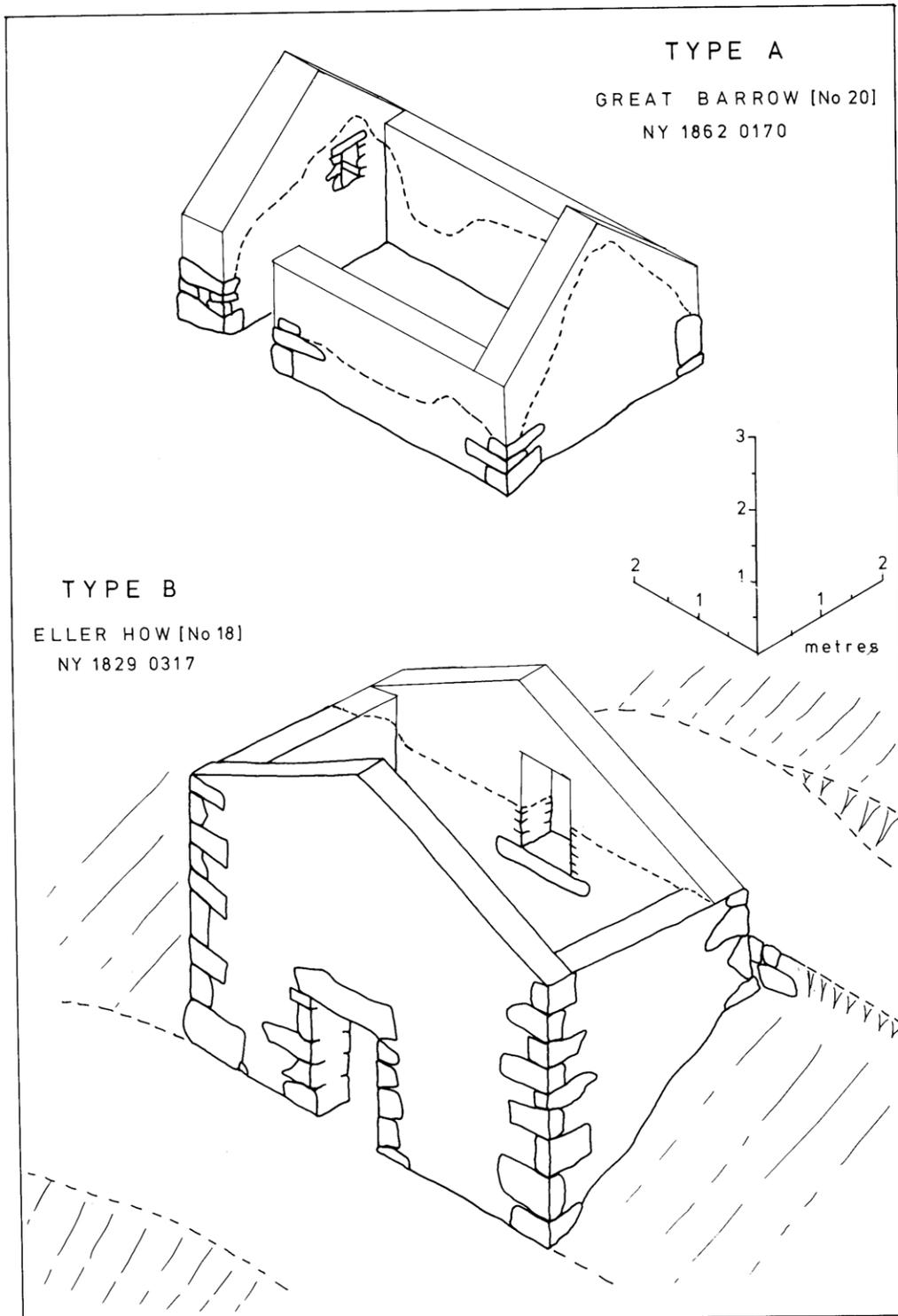


FIG. 2. - Types A and B storage huts.

of peat is confirmed both by local tradition⁶ and by references in documents drawn up in connection with a lawsuit in 1795 concerning the illegal enclosure of the fellside between Blea Tarn and Boot Bank.⁷ The brief for the plaintiff's lawyer gives a succinct description of the use of the huts at that date:

as the places for Turbary lay upon the Tops of the Hills and it is often difficult to win their peats in Summer, every Tenant has a House or Peat Scale in some suitable place where he can conveniently go in Winter to fetch his Peats from when they are wanted and where they are deposited in Summer and stored up for that purpose.⁸

A sketch map drawn to accompany the brief (Fig. 4) clearly marks several "peat scales" in the area in question, including the cluster on Boot Bank (nos. 9-17 in Fig. 1).

The description of the use of the huts towards the end of the 18th century, quoted above, corresponds closely with local memories of the latter days of peat-cutting in Eskdale in the years after the First World War.⁹ Then, peat was cut, dried in stacks on the peat moss for four or five weeks, then taken by sledge to the peat scale, where it was left to dry out further until it was brought to the farm as needed during the winter. The semi-dried peats were tipped into the storage shed through the upper door and were shovelled out through the lower door. Each peat scale belonged to a different house in the valley and the location of the peat scales on the fellsides was generally determined by the pattern of sheep "drifts", the recognized routes along which sheep were driven from the farmsteads to the high fells.¹⁰ Thus hut no. 19, lying at the head of the narrow driftway on the north-western side of the intakes on Great Barrow, preserved to allow stock from Hows Farm to be driven to the fell, belonged to Hows Farm. Other huts where ownership has been identified include numbers 1 (Fisher Ground), 2 (Hollinhow), 6 (the Vicarage),¹¹ 8 (Borrowdale Place until the late 18th century),¹² 9-17 (Church House, Borrowdale Place, and the houses and cottages in Boot), 18 (Gillbank), 20 (Christcliff), 21 or 22 (Arment House), 30-32 (Penny Hill, Spot How), 33 (Low Birker), and 34 (Dalegarth Hall).¹³ Oral evidence suggests that the huts finally ceased to be used for peat storage between the First and Second World Wars. The hut belonging to Gillbank Farm (no. 18) was last used *c.* 1923¹⁴ and in the 1940s disused peat-cutting equipment in the huts on Boot Bank was finally removed.¹⁵

Documentary evidence is less forthcoming, however, about the chronology of, first, the origins of the custom of building peat scales in Eskdale and second, the change in building style from Type A to Type B huts. All that can be said with certainty about the origins of the peat scales is that some, at least, were in existence by the late 16th century. The Eskdale Commons Award of 1587 mentions "guddum peat skales" on the cattle drift route from Bird How and Taw House to "Cattbeck" (now Catcove Beck),¹⁶ a description which suggests that they might be identified with huts 27 or 28. Other early references to the huts are scarce. A "skale-house" in Miterdale, belonging to the tenant of Bakerstead in 1587,¹⁷ may have been associated with peat storage. A "scale or peat house" near "Haslegill" in Austhwaite, mentioned in 1716,¹⁸ certainly was.

The papers concerning the 1795 lawsuit, quoted above, also throw a chance glimmer of light on the date of the change from Type A to Type B huts. As Fig. 4 shows, the sketch plan drawn for the case marks several peat scales including that at Nab Gill (no. 8), which it labels "Old Peat Scale" and the group at the head of Boot Bank, one of

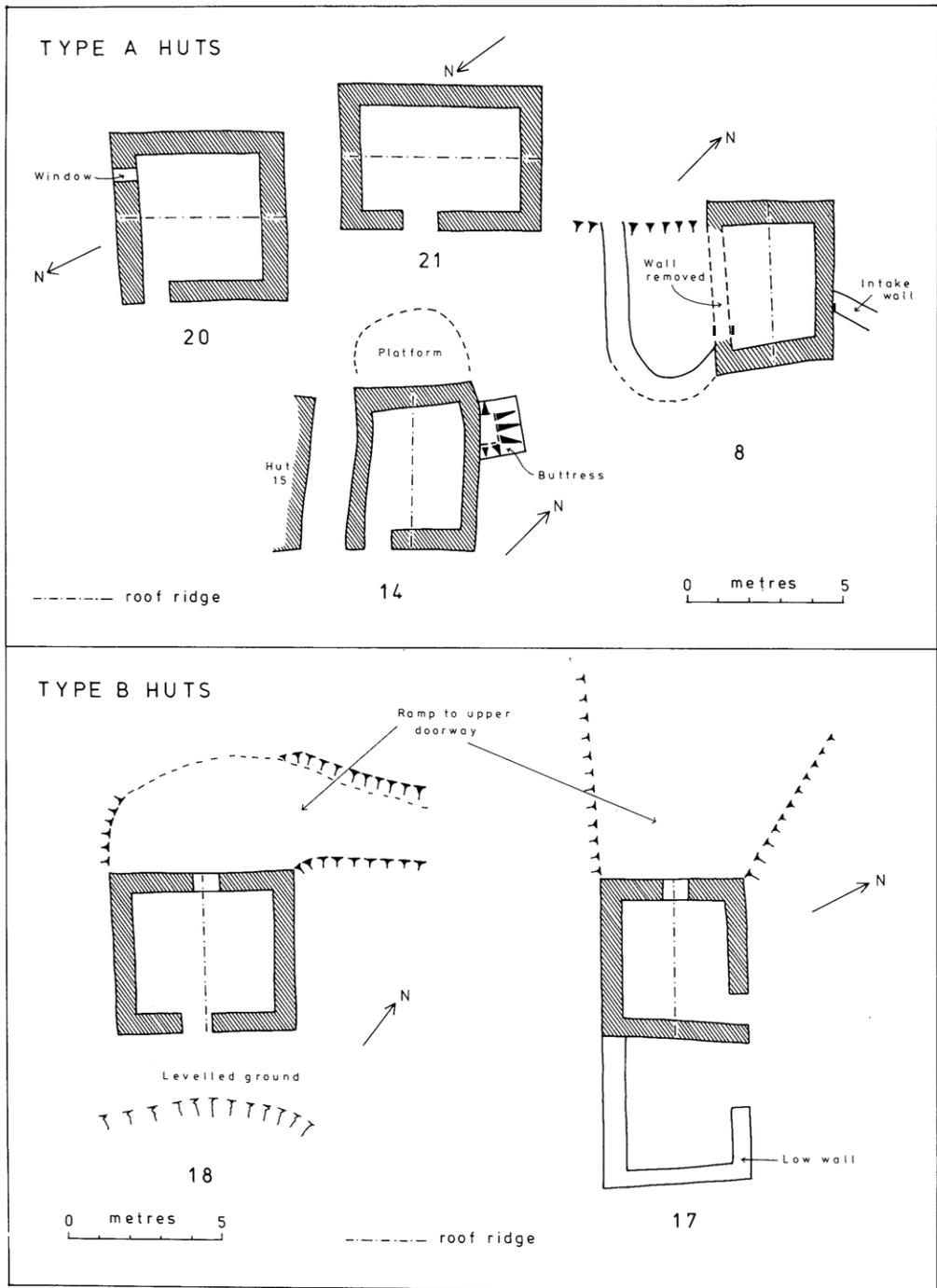


FIG. 3. - Plans of selected peat storage huts.

which (possibly no. 11 on Fig. 1) is said to belong to the defendant in the suit, Thomas Tyson of Borrowdale Place. The papers make it clear that the latter was a fairly recent replacement for the 'old' hut at Nab Gill:

the owners of [Borrowdale Place] had a house or shed for putting their peats into upon this spot near the Naboth gill head . . . but [Tyson] has discontinued this Peat Scale and removed it to amongst the Peat Scales belonging to the Tenants of the Bought, where he has erected a new one which he now uses.¹⁹

The change must have taken place between 1764, when Tyson inherited Borrowdale Place from his father,²⁰ and 1795. The "old" peat scale at Nab Gill (no. 8, see Fig. 3) is a Type A hut; its replacement at Boot Bank, if identified correctly as no. 11, is a Type B structure. By 1860 the earlier hut had been converted into a sheepfold.²¹

In summary, the documentary and oral evidence suggests that the tradition of erecting small stone huts on the fellsides of Eskdale for the storage of peat reaches back to the 16th century at least. By the mid 18th century we may conclude that there was a scatter of simple, low thatched structures along the valley sides. The position of some of these huts near steep slopes with no evidence of well-built tracks perhaps suggests that peat was transported from them without vehicular aid, either in panniers on pack horses, or on human backs. The change to a more substantial storage hut associated with carefully graded sledge tracks may have taken place in the late 18th century: with one exception, only these later huts were in use by 1860. The farms higher up the valley which do not appear to have re-built their huts in the new style and which were further from the extensive peat mosses may have ceased to use peat for fuel at an earlier date than those lower down the dale. It should be noted however, that the number of farms in the valley dropped during the 17th and 18th centuries as holdings were amalgamated. Some deserted Type A huts are probably to be accounted for by this process. Peat-cutting died out in the early 20th century and almost all the huts have since fallen into decay, although the roof has been maintained on one hut to provide a fellside shelter for stock.

Discussion

The chief interest of the peat storage huts in Eskdale lies in the fact that such structures for the drying and storage of peat at a distance from the farmstead are unusual both elsewhere in the Lake District and in Britain as a whole. Parallels to the Eskdale huts have been sought in an attempt to seek an explanation for their occurrence in the valley.

Common of turbary (the right to dig peat for fuel on the manorial waste) was ubiquitous in Lakeland manors and was controlled by the manor court. In the 17th and 18th centuries the courts attempted to conserve supplies of peat by insisting that peat could only be used in houses in the manor where it was dug; by restricting the amount of peat each commoner could dig to a limited number of "dayworks" each year; and by fixing a date between late April and late May (often 1st May) before which peat-cutting was illegal.²² The usual calendar for obtaining peat in Cumbria involved peat-cutting in May, after which the peats were stacked to dry on the moss until they were brought into the farmstead after hay-making in July.²³ A similar process was carried out in most other peat-using areas of upland Britain: in Shetland, for example, peats were dug in May,

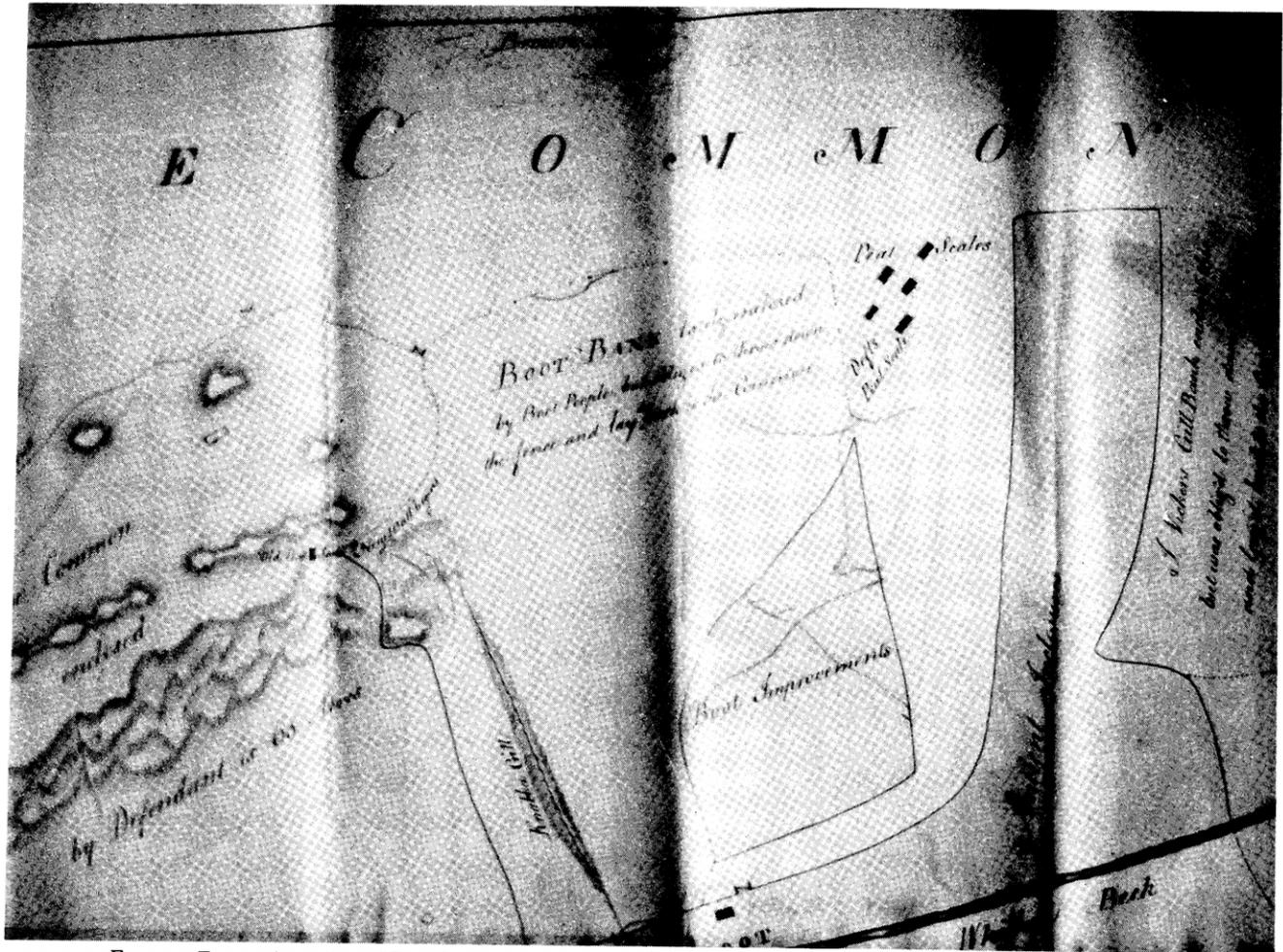


FIG. 4. – Extract from plan of Boot Bank, 1795, identifying ‘peat scales’ (source: C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Ben/3/756).

dried in stacks, and transported to the crofts in July.²⁴ On the Shetland Island of Fetlar “peat houses” were built on the peat mosses in the late 19th century, but these were temporary dwellings for use when transporting peats in the summer,²⁵ rather than drying and storage huts like those in Eskdale.

Separate buildings for the storage of peat are recorded frequently in the Lake District from the 16th century.²⁶ What is unusual about the Eskdale huts is their location out on the fellside: most other Lakeland “peat houses” were situated among the other buildings of the farmstead. Parallels to the Eskdale huts are to be found, however, in the “peat cotes”, apparently situated on the moss at Underbarrow, in the Lyth valley, in the 16th century,²⁷ and in what appear to have been outlying “peat houses” at Lorton in the Cocker valley, mentioned in 1578.²⁸ The best known surviving peat scales outside Eskdale are those beside the track from Wasdalehead to Burnmoor.²⁹

References to similar structures have been found in only two other areas. In the hills of north-eastern Caernarvonshire “long, narrow, rectangular buildings of massive dry-stone masonry, known as Peat Houses (Hafodtai Mawn)” have been recorded.³⁰ From the published plan of one such hut these Welsh equivalents seem to have been similar to the Type A huts of Eskdale, though rather longer and narrower (c. 6.0 × 3.0 m.). A second parallel is to be found on some of the Faeroe Islands where a variety of peat storage huts have been built on the peat mosses. Some, as on Svinoy,³¹ are wooden sheds; others, as on Mykines,³² are small, low, stone huts with turf roofs, again bearing a close similarity to the Type A huts described above.

In conclusion, an attempt must be made to consider why the inhabitants of Eskdale went to the expense of building such structures, while many other Lake District communities seem to have succeeded in obtaining their peat without storage huts on the commons. The reason given in the 1795 lawsuit papers, quoted above, was that “it is often difficult to win their peats in summer”. Presumably, the phrase “to win” is used here to cover the whole process of obtaining peats, from cutting them to bringing them to the farmstead. Inability to complete the process in the summer could arise from two factors: either the climate on the exposed, high level peat mosses might have been too wet to allow the peats to dry sufficiently, or perhaps, aggravated by the slowness of drying, the farming calendar of the summer months (hay-making, sheep clipping, harvest) might not have allowed sufficient time to carry the peats down. It seems likely that the first factor, the wetness of the Lakeland summer, was of particular importance: climate probably also accounts for the existence of similar peat storage huts in the notoriously wet Faeroes and perhaps, on the upland peat mosses of north-eastern Caernarvonshire. It may be argued that precipitation in Eskdale is not appreciably higher than elsewhere in the Lake District and that climate alone cannot explain the need for peat scales in the valley. The relatively high altitude of the peat deposits would account for some difference in climate between the Eskdale peat mosses and those of some other valleys, but the decisive factor may perhaps, have been the extremely steep fellsides of Eskdale which separated the farmsteads from their peat supplies. It might well have been considered preferable to carry completely dry peat down these at intervals during the winter than to carry the extra weight of water in crumbling, semi-dried peats in the summer.



PLATE 1. – Peat storage huts on Boot Bank. From L to R.: no. 10 (Type B); no. 22 (Type B); no. 9 (Type A).

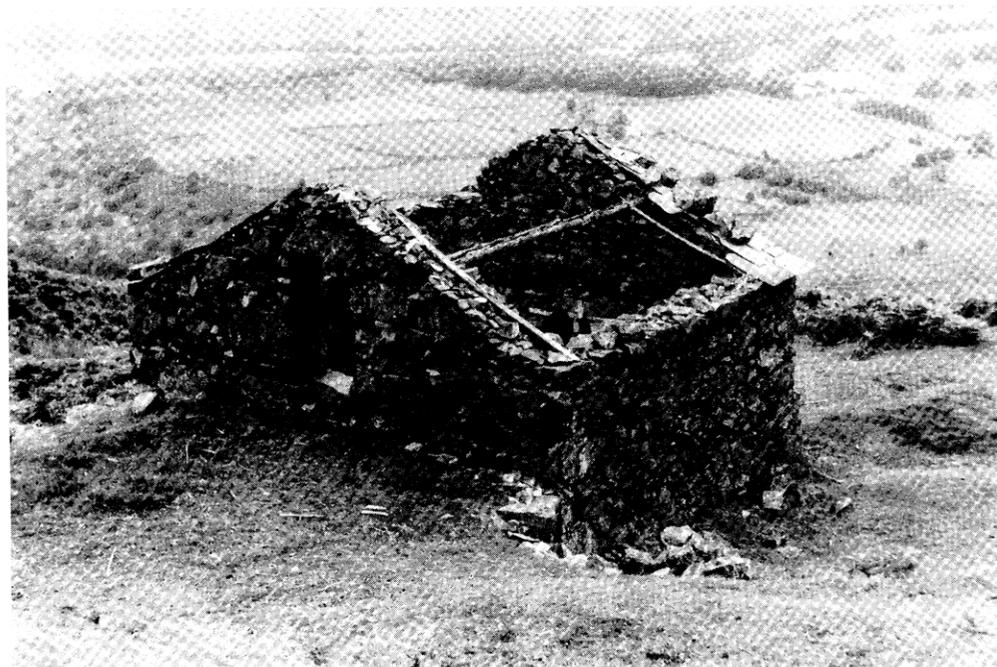


PLATE 2. – Hut no. 33, Birker Fell.

Appendix I
Peat Storage Huts in Eskdale, Cumbria

No. on Fig. 1	Grid Ref.	External Dimensions (metres)	Type	Condition in 1860*	Remarks
1	NY 1534 0063	6.75×4.6	B	R	S. wall rebuilt; upper and lower doorways blocked; hearth built in S.E. corner. Modifications possibly associated with late 19th century iron mine 100m. N.E. of hut.
2	NY 1528 0070	6.0×5.3	B	R	
3	NY 1589 0065	5.3×4.0	A	—	
4	NY 1617 0053	5.9×3.85	A	U	Foundations of rectangular structure (8.3×3.5 m.) aligned with hut c. 5 m. to S.E.
5	NY 1620 0066	6.0×5.0	B	R	Roof almost intact (1983)
6	NY 1652 0080	6.4×4.6	B	U	
7	NY 1662 0073	5.4×3.9	A	U	
8	NY 1720 0134	5.5×3.8	A	U	? converted to sheepfold by enlargement involving removal of S.W. wall
9	NY 1760 0182	4.9×4.4	A	R	Additional walled space (? lean-to), 4.25×2.35 m. at N. end
10	NY 1762 0183	6.8×4.5	B	R	Roof intact (1982)
11	NY 1761 0179	4.6×4.2	B	R	Enlarged to 7.1×4.6 m. by extending N-S axis
12	NY 1765 0181	4.8×3.1	B?	—	Demolished; rubble-filled remains incorporated into sledge track
13	NY 1766 0187	5.2×5.05	B	R	Partially roofed (1982)
14	NY 1767 0190	5.1×3.9	A	U	Semi-circular platform at N.W. end
15	NY 1766 0190	5.1×5.1	B	R	
16	NY 1761 0191	5.9×4.9	B	R	Semi-circular platform at S.E. end
17	NY 1762 0188	5.0×4.6	B	R	Walled enclosure (4.8×4.8 m.) adjoining on S.E. side
18	NY 1829 0317	5.9×5.1	B	R	
19	NY 1826 0183	5.5×4.6	B	R	
20	NY 1862 0170	5.5×5.5	A	U	Foundations of rectangular structure (6.3×4.0 m.) c. 5 m. to S.
21	NY 1880 0143	6.45×4.55	A	U	
22	NY 1882 0147	5.45×4.95	B	R	

23	NY 1964 0153	6.0×4.9	A	—	
24	NY 1964 0156	5.1×3.5	A	—	Foundations extend 2.6 m. to W. of standing structure
25	NY 1967 0155	7.0×3.9	A	—	Two-celled structure with single entrance
26	NY 1981 0131	4.65×4.05	A	U	
27	NY 2077 0197	5.2×3.6	A	—	
28	NY 2097 0244	6.3×4.0	A	—	Foundations of rectangular structure (6.6×3.8 m.) lie immediately to N.W.
29	NY 2122 0260	6.5×4.6	—	—	Built into bank, but structure too decayed to allow classification
30	NY 1967 0016	5.4×3.8	A	U	
31	NY 1951 0011	12.4×3.6	A	U	Double hut consisting of two cells each c. 6.2×3.6 m, and each with own entrance
32	NY 1952 0005	5.3×4.1	A	U	
33	NY 1906 0004	5.8×4.95	B	R	
34	SD 1707 9956	7.0×5.3	B	—	
35	SD 1629 9949	4.3×3.4	A	—	

* Condition in 1860 derived from O.S. 1/2,500 plans, Cumb. lxxix, 10-16 and lxxxiii, 2. R = roofed; U = unroofed; — = not marked on plan.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and References

¹ For a discussion of the extent of peat deposits in the Lake District, see W. H. Pearsall and W. Pennington, *The Lake District: a Landscape History* (London, 1973), 126-9.

² *Ibid*, 264-7.

³ O.S. Air Photos, 72-019 (frames 567-70, 585-7); 72-020 (frames 529-31); 72-106 (frames 638-41, 674-8, 739-41, 794-6).

⁴ O.S. 1/2,500 plans, Cumb. sheets lxxix. 10-16, lxxxiii. 2.

⁵ Cf. frequent refs. to 'thack brackens' - e.g. C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Ben/Crosthwaite Tithes/Wasdalehead manor ct. award, 1664.

⁶ Inf. from Mr N. D. Baines, Hows Farm, and Mr G. Ellwood, Taw House, Eskdale (1982).

⁷ Cumbria Record Office (Carlisle), D/Ben/3/731-764. Remains of the illegal enclosure wall, built c. 1782-6, are visible along the path over Bleatarn Hill.

⁸ D/Ben/3/762, f. 14.

- ⁹ The following paragraph is based on information from Mr N. D. Baines, Hows Farm, Eskdale (1982), except where otherwise stated.
- ¹⁰ The drifts were laid down by order of the manor ct. in 1587: C.R.O. (Carlisle) D/Lec, Commons Cattle Drift and Heaf Award of the Twenty-four men of Eskdale, Miterdale and Wasdalehead, 1587 (copy dated 1692).
- ¹¹ W. S. Sykes, MS Collections, vol. ii, sec VIII, s.v. 'Peat Moss' (MS volume in C.R.O. (Carlisle)).
- ¹² C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Ben/3/762, f. 14.
- ¹³ Information from Col. N. A. Stanley, Dalegarth Hall (1983).
- ¹⁴ Information from Mr Baines, Hows Farm (1982).
- ¹⁵ Information from Mr G. Ellwood, Taw House (1982).
- ¹⁶ C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Lec, Eskdale Award, 1587, p. 14.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Pen/172, Austhwaite and Birker manor ct., 7 Feb. 1716.
- ¹⁹ C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Ben/3/762, ff. 13-14.
- ²⁰ C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Lec, box 94, identification abstracts, Eskdale, no. 21.
- ²¹ O.S. 1/2,500 plan Cumb. lxxix. 10.
- ²² See R. S. Dilley, 'Common Land in Cumbria 1500-1850' (unpub. M.Litt. Thesis. Univ. of Cambridge, 1973), 138-51.
- ²³ W. Rollinson, *Life and Tradition in the Lake District* (London, 1974), 102-3.
- ²⁴ A. Fenton, *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland* (Edinburgh, 1978), 223-32.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 233-6.
- ²⁶ 'Peat houses' are frequently referred to in the Percy Survey of the western valleys of the Lake District in 1578: C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Lec, box 301, 1578 Survey, ff. 117-19, 125, 127-8, 168-9, 177, 187. At Grizedale Hall, Furness, the peat house was a separate building in the hall complex in 1697: Lancs. R.O., DDX 398/122. For description of an 18th century peat house see B. Tyson, 'Some Traditional Buildings in the Troutbeck Valley', CW2, lxxxii, 162-4.
- ²⁷ *Wills and Inventories of the Archdeaconry of Richmond* (Surtees Soc. 26, 1853), p. 39. A similar 'peat cote' at Greenrigg in Underbarrow had been converted into a dwelling by 1591: C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Lons/L, Kendal barony/3/3, Barnhills ct., 22 Sept. 1591.
- ²⁸ One was near Armaside; the other in the Whit Beck valley. Neither appears to have had a dwelling by it, and both seem to have been near the fell dyke: C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/Lec, box 301, 1578 Survey, ff. 164v, 167.
- ²⁹ At NY 182 063, where 3 huts were still roofed in 1860: O.S. 1/2,500 plan, Cumb. lxxiv. 15.
- ³⁰ R.C.A.H.M. Wales, *Inventory of Ancient Monuments in Caernarvonshire*, i (London, 1956), p. lxxviii.
- ³¹ Information from Mr R. G. David, Kendal (1982).
- ³² Information from Mr J. R. Baldwin, Edinburgh (1982).

