

ART. XIV – *Stone fox traps, borran and goose bield*

By PETER FLEMING

PRIOR to the introduction of organised foxhound packs in Lakeland during the early 19th century, it was common practice to lure foxes into specially constructed stone traps. These were usually, but not always, sited on or close to a “borran”, which is best described as a large boulder-field at the base of a crag, beneath which there are often small caves and deep recesses where foxes live and breed, and where they go to “earth” if pursued.

The word borran is in common use by North Country fox hunters and hill farmers, and has been for many generations. The word comes from the Old English *burgaesn*,<sup>1</sup> meaning a burial mound or ancient heap of stones, which suggests they are man made features. To apply this name to a fox’s earth is not strictly correct. The term I would prefer to apply is “bield” which is a Cumbrian dialect word for a shelter or animal den, from the Old English *belde*.<sup>2</sup> However, being a supporter of local traditions, I shall continue to use the word borran.

In the high fell country there are many well known borran. Most of them show much evidence of excavation by huntsmen and farmers to rescue trapped terrier dogs sent in after the fox, or to retrieve the body of the fox after the terrier had done its work. Many tons of rock were frequently removed over several days. Hundreds of man hours have been spent in attempts to effect rescues, sometimes in vain – several terriers have died in the underground labyrinths.

At Broadhow in the Troutbeck Valley (O.S. ref. 420088), there is an extensive borran covering a large area of fellside. The nucleus is formed by a landslipped crag leaving deep crevices and caves where there is much evidence of major excavations.

Below Dove Crag, Dovedale, Brotherswater (O.S. ref. 378109), is another extensive borran mainly formed by very large boulders having fallen from the crag above. A lot of work has been carried out to infill cracks and cave entrances with dry stone pack to prevent foxes going to earth.

Again major excavations are evident and two five foot hexagonal steel pinch bars remain here, where they must have lain for several decades as none of the work is recent.

At Yew Crag, Hardnott, Eskdale (O.S. ref. 221021), scree slopes cover a large area of fellside. The boulder-field at the base shows extensive excavations probably dating back to the 19th century judging from the weathered nature of debris.

Above Levers Water, Coniston, at the base of Great How Crag (O.S. ref. 277999) is another extensive borran known to huntsmen and hill farmers as Hookriggs. This consists of a large boulder-field where much work has been done to infill cracks, holes and crevices and which probably resulted in less excavation work being required than with other borran of this size. It is also the only large one to have a fox trap built on site.

It is probable that most of the stone fox traps were constructed in the 18th century when hunters were largely pre-occupied with stag hunting. By the early part of the 19th century, when stags were almost driven to extinction, hunters turned

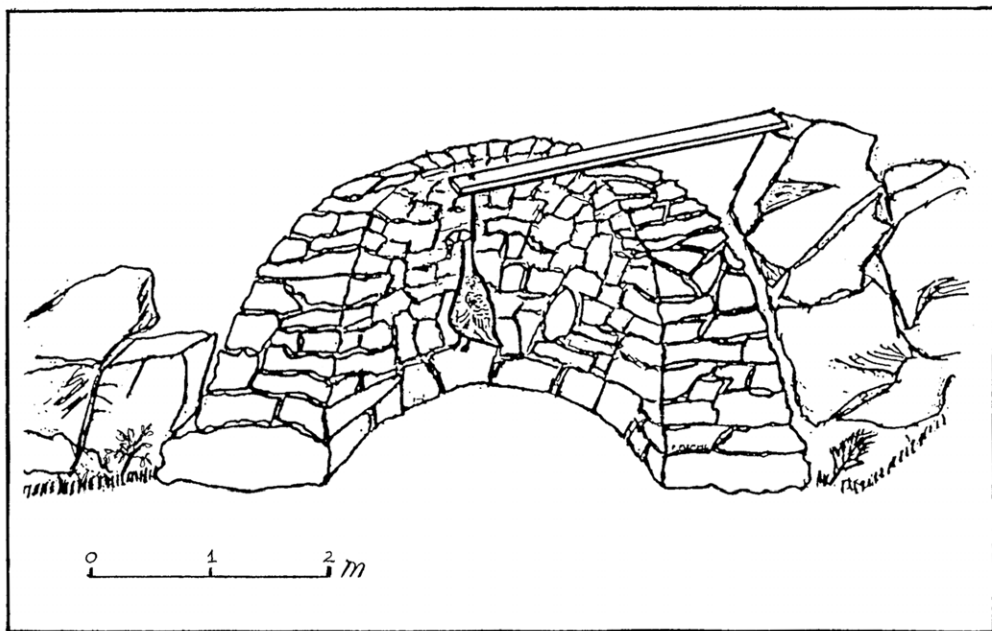


FIG. 1. A Stone Fox Trap – shown in section, ready baited with a goose

more of their attention to pursuing hares, polecats and foxes.<sup>3</sup> Fellhounds were specially bred and trained for this purpose.

The Coniston pack was the first to be operated through public subscription in 1825, although prior to this privately run packs operated from kennels at Threlkeld belonging to the Crozier family, and also at Dalemain near Pooley Bridge.<sup>4</sup>

By the year 1870, the number of fellhound packs had increased to eight,<sup>5</sup> and the stone fox traps fell into disuse and were no longer maintained (with one or two exceptions).

The stone traps (Fig. 1) were built on the principle of an igloo, but without an entrance and with the inner walls overhanging considerably all round, leaving a circular opening on top of 1.5 metres or less, with the floor at least 2 metres below. The trap was baited by attaching the fresh carcass of a goose or chicken to the inner end of a plank projecting over the wall and balanced from the adjacent fellside or large boulder. The weight of the fox up-ended the plank, tipping the fox into the trap, from where it would, in theory, be unable to climb or leap out of the constricted space. It would then be shot within a day or two and retrieved for the value of its pelt.

Little has been written to date on the subject of these traps, and where they are mentioned only the two well known ones at Levers Water, Coniston, and Great Borne in Ennerdale are referred to by Thomas Hay<sup>6</sup> and Richard Plint.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the first article referred to the Great Borne trap as a “goose bield”, and every writer since has used this description. The name has remained with us, but it is wrong and misleading. There are goose bields to be found but they served a different purpose. They were designed to keep geese in and foxes out. Like a fox

trap they were circular with no entrance, but much larger. The walls were of the conventional dry stone style without an overhanging inner side, instead they had capstones overhanging around the outside to prevent foxes jumping in.

The geese would have their flight feathers docked to prevent them taking off and escaping. The bield would often be sited at a respectable distance from the farmhouse, no doubt on account of the noise geese are capable of generating in the early hours of the morning. Like the fox traps they have not been used for a considerable time. Further reference will be made to certain goose bields in the description which follows of eight fox traps.

As it is probably two hundred years or more since most of them were built they have suffered the ravages of time and weather. None are now complete, the upper overhanging inner walls having tumbled in. Two traps, however, have been partially restored in recent years by well-meaning enthusiasts.

Seven of the fox traps are all to be found in the southern and western fells, the other is sited in Central Lakeland. The author is unaware of any in the northern or eastern fells despite the extensive borran to be found there.

### **Great Borne, Herdus Scaw, Ennerdale**

This trap is 95% intact having been restored in recent years, and is therefore a good example. However, in its original condition the top opening would have been smaller, perhaps only 1.0 metre in diameter. The trap has a stone ramp built to its top on the north side, linking it to the source of stone from which it was built. It is sited in a small heathery hollow behind a knoll on the slopes of Herdus Scaw. It has a commanding view of Ennerdale Lake. A borran in a boulder-field lies 50 metres to the east, where there is much evidence of excavation work.

As late as the mid-1920s, two brothers named Carrick, who lived in Bowness Cottage near the lake, used to bait this trap with a live goose and then lie in wait with a gun. They did this during the evening after work, just as a hobby.<sup>8</sup>

### **Mecklin Park, Irton Fell, Nether Wasdale (Plate 1)**

This one is an oddity in that it is not sited near a borran or even a boulder-field. It stands on a grassy fellside next to a rock outcrop. It is 65% intact: the upper part having collapsed internally and externally on the downward slope. Very little remains of the internal overhang. It was possibly built around a pre-dug pit to give added internal depth. The trap is slightly oval because of the use of long *in situ* boulders, which form part of the base.

### **Hare Crag, Wha House, Eskdale**

Situated near the top of the crag on a grassy plateau, it is 70% intact. The floor area is covered with the collapsed wall rubble from the north side, which is adjacent to the fell slope. It still retains pronounced overhangs on parts of the internal walls. The choice of its site is curious, as the screes and boulder-field lie, of course, around the base of the crag, where there is a large goose bield with an external diameter of



PLATE 1. The fox trap at Mecklin Park, Irton Fell (Photo: Peter Fleming)

8.60 metres. The walls stand 1.60 metres high and are 0.80 metres thick. There is no entrance. The walls on the north and eastern sides are still capped with large angular blocks which overhang on the outside as if to prevent foxes or any other predators jumping in; the capstones on the remaining sides having fallen off. The nearest farm is Wha House, two hundred metres away. The bield is situated in a slight hollow out of sight of the valley road below.

Some 300 metres due west of the head of Stanley Gill (O.S. ref. 17119947) there stands what was probably another goose bield. It is roughly oblong in shape with rounded corners and measures 4.00 metres by 3.30 metres. The walls are 1.00 metre thick and presently stand 1.00 metre high. No entry is provided. This bield is built in a sheltered hollow and is only visible from close proximity. It is equidistant, at 700 metres, between Dalegarth Hall and Low Ground Farm. 50 metres below and to the north is a small borran which at the time of my visit in May 1995 contained recent remains of a small lamb and game bird, indicating current use by foxes.

Approximately 100 metres north of the bield is a roofless bank barn formerly used for the storage of peat, and 2 kilometres south-east of the bield (O.S. ref. 18959877) is a feature marked on the Ordnance Survey map as "Fox Bield". It is a shattered island of rock rising from the centre of an area of marshy ground known as Fox Bield Moss. This cleaved and broken rock outcrop is ideally suited to provide an animal's den.

### **Great Blake Rigg, Grey Friar**

200 metres north of the end of Seathwaite Tarn there is a stone fox trap which is 60% intact. It appears to have fallen in on itself and is partly filled with its own rubble. Many large boulders were used in its construction. The overhang of the internal walls is still evident. Originally this trap must have been over 2.0 metres high with a top opening of about 1.30 metres. It is located at the base of an extensive boulder-field. Within 8 metres of the trap are two small caves, partially walled to form shelters or hides for hunters. One has a built-in bench seat. There are many other small caves in the area which are still occupied by foxes. Several crevices are still infilled and sealed to prevent them going to earth. 30 metres to the north-west, and 10 metres higher up the fellside, is a second fox trap which appears to be of a later date than the lower one, and was probably intended to replace it. However, it was never finished. The completed one-third of a side is 95% intact and stands 2.20 metres high. It is made up of much smaller stones than other traps. A further one third is made up of very large *in situ* boulders, whilst the remaining one third has never been built. The trap stands on the western edge of the boulder-field near several small caves. There is much evidence of excavations within the borran, probably to retrieve lost terrier dogs. None of this work is recent.

### **Stonestar, Ulpha**

This trap was built within the area of a borran in a rocky gully immediately north-east of the larger gully containing the locally named priests road<sup>9</sup> which runs between Stonestar and Pickthall Ground. The trap appears to have been crudely made and must have been smaller than average. Use was made of several large *in situ* boulders to form the base. Little remains of the upper section, just enough on its eastern side to prove its existence. Fallen masonry lies below the trap to the west and also inside.

The borran shows much evidence of excavations to retrieve lost terriers. Also several crevices are still blocked off to prevent foxes going to earth. The weathered nature of the excavated area suggests the work took place many years ago.

A further 100 metres south-east, higher up the gully where it widens out, is a walled enclosure of irregular shape. It is about 10 metres across, rather like the goose bield at Hare Crag, Eskdale. This one, however, does have a narrow entrance. It is 400 metres from Stonestar, which was formerly a farm.

### **The Prison (Hookriggs), Levers Water, Coniston (Plate 2 and 3)**

At the base of Great How Crag, with a commanding view of Levers Water, stands a fine example of a fox trap in its original form, this despite being only 65% intact. It was built by skilled dry stone wallers judging by the neat, close fitting finish on the internal walls. It has lost most of the upper overhanging section which now covers the floor area inside. Originally this trap must have stood about 2.50 metres high and may have been built around a pre-dug pit to provide added depth. To the west and the north is an extensive borran within a complex boulder-field containing many small caves. An enormous amount of work has been done to seal and block off



PLATE 2. The fox trap at Hookriggs – detail (Photo: Peter Fleming)

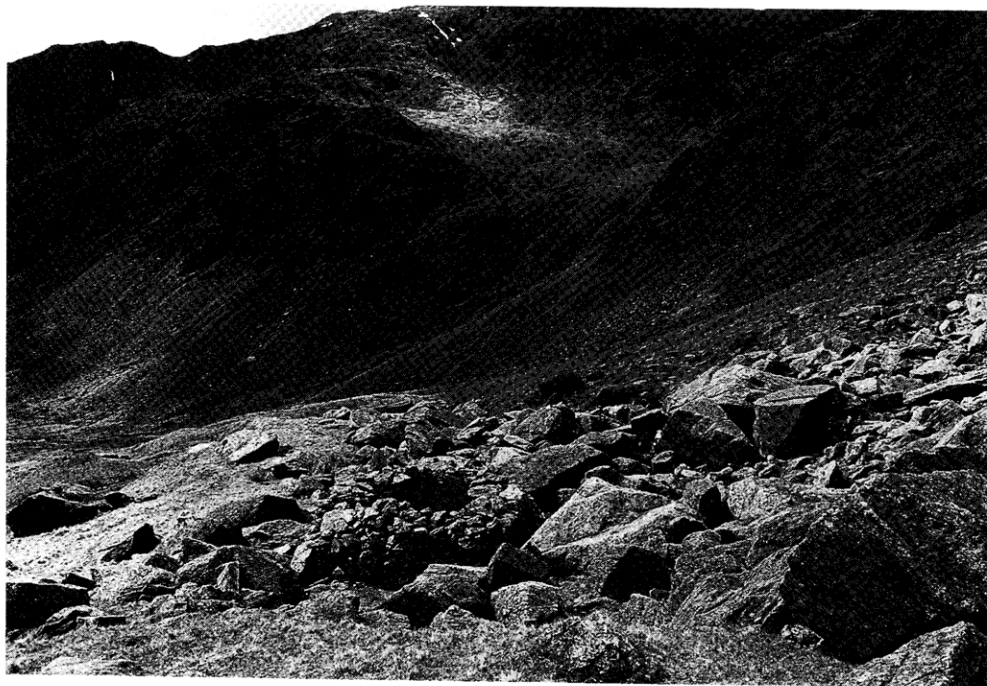


PLATE 3. The fox trap at Hookriggs – situation (Photo: Christopher Wright)

dozens of entrances and crevices over a wide area, especially to the north. Despite this there are excavations still evident. This borran is known locally as "Hookriggs."

Lower down the fellside, 100 metres south of the fox trap are the ruins of an interesting building. This was formerly roofed with slate and has undergone alterations with sealed window spaces, and added walls. An important clue to its origins is to be found opposite the doorway. A very weathered inscription on a large boulder has the date 1738 and some unclear initials. It is quite possible that this building could have been used as a summer dwelling for a hill shepherd and could therefore have a direct working connection with the nearby fox trap. The doorway is in the western wall and is reached by two stone steps through well made walls 0.70 metres thick. The maximum height of the standing walls is 2.44 metres at the south-east corner. The internal floor space measures 3.00 metres by 4.00 metres. There was formerly an opening in the northern wall, giving access to a small enclosure measuring 3.00 metres by 3.35 metres, which still stands to its full height of 1.50 metres complete with capstones. The western side of these structures has a roughly made crescent shaped wall built in front of it, incorporating the crude slates formerly used to roof the building. The date, 1738, rules out any link with coppermining in the area. The mines were dormant at this time and the building is too remote from any working to have served any practical use.

### **The Benn, Shoulthwaite Moss**

Lying 1 kilometre north-west of Thirlmere dam, this is the only fox trap known to the author outside of the Southern and Western Fells. It is 65% intact, having been partially rebuilt in the 1980s and is larger than the other traps. The eastern and northern walls have been restored to what was probably their full height, but lack the degree of overhang they would originally have had. The floor area has been cleared and the rubble deposited on the west and south edges where the walls are fallen. The north-west side is formed by a convenient, large, overhanging boulder 2.5 metres high and 2.5 metres wide with a flat top. Four metres of wall is yet to be re-built.

This trap is very difficult to find, having been surrounded by the forestry plantation. It lies to the north of a large boulder-field which was the site of a borran. This is not accessible on account of the dense plantation.

In addition to the eight fox traps listed above, which were surveyed in the summer of 1995, several more locations were investigated in response to information given by farmers and people with local knowledge. These include Heron Crag, Eskdale; Goatswater, Coniston; Hollow Stones, Scafell; Warnscale, Buttermere; Burtness Combe, Buttermere. Nothing conclusive was found at any of these sites. Nevertheless any further information which may lead to identifying further fox traps or goose bields would be welcomed and followed up to add to this list.

### **Postscript**

Since this article was written, the Lake District National Park Authority Ranger Service supervised the restoration of the fox trap and goose bield at Hare Crag in Eskdale, during the summer of 1997. The work was undertaken by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.



TABLE 1 Fox Traps  
Locations and Dimensions

Fox trap location	Map ref.	altitude metres	external height	internal height	external diameter	internal diameter base	internal diameter top
Great Borne Ennerdale	11831595	370.00	1.70 max. 1.30 average	1.60	4.50	2.10	1.60
Mecklin Park Nether Wasdale	13160225	215.00	1.20	1.30	4.25 average	1.95	1.60
Hare Crag Eskdale	20080117	200.00	2.00	2.00	4.60	3.00 average	2.00
Great Blake Rigg Grey Friar	25829950	437.00	1.60	1.50	4.20	<i>not possible to measure</i>	2.00
Great Blake Rigg Grey Friar	25819951	446.00	2.20	1.60	3.60	2.00	1.20 estimate
Stonestar Ulpha	20499121	138.00	<i>Not enough remains to take meaningful measurements</i>				
The Prison Levers Water	27809988	523.00	1.60	1.80	4.80	2.90	2.60
The Benn Shoulthwaite	30351995	192.00	2.00	2.00	6.30 average	4.30	3.70

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are given to Mr David Bridge of St Bees, for drawing attention to the Mecklin Park fox trap, and to Mr John Bird of Ennerdale Bridge, for information on the Great Borne fox trap. Without the help of Mr Laurie Walton, the gamekeeper for North West Water Ltd., I should not have found the Shoulthwaite Moss trap.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Gambles, *Lake District Place Names* (Skipton, 1994), 46.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Clapham, *Foxes, Foxhounds and Foxhunting* (London, 1921), 181.
- <sup>4</sup> C. E. Benson, *Crag and Hound in Lakeland* (London, 1902), 299-300.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 299-303.
- <sup>6</sup> CW2, xliii, 28ff.
- <sup>7</sup> CW2, lxxii, 332f.
- <sup>8</sup> From information supplied by Mr John Bird of Ennerdale Bridge. May 1995.
- <sup>9</sup> A. L. Evans, *Lost Lancashire* (1991), 118.