

A Brief History of Kentmere

Our story probably begins around 4000BC and it is likely that the first people to inhabit this valley were wandering groups who came here in the later Stone Age. At that time our hills were almost covered in forest and the few animals they had with them would graze along the edge of the wooded areas gradually clearing them. By Roman times much of the forest had been driven back so even in those early days farming had a significant impact upon the landscape and the farmers' work over centuries eventually led to the attractive patchwork of fields, walls and woodland that we have today.

It is probable that the first people to settle here were here came during the Iron Age. They would be Celtic farmers who between 100BC and AD400 built small communities in the valley. Four of these settlements have been discovered. The sites of their huts – although now little more than piles of stone – are still visible. The site at Millriggs is particularly interesting. A glass bracelet dating from AD150 was found there.

The Romans came to this part of the world around AD90. They built a fort at Watercrock, Kendal and another at Galava, Ambleside and the road linking them ran through Kentmere. This road would be used by local people as well and perhaps there was a measure of trade with the Roman soldiers. Two places – 'High Street' and Broadgate' show evidence of a paved road above Kentmere to the west although after the Romans left around AD400 the forts and roads all fell into disrepair and ruin.

The people who made the most significant difference to the valley were probably the 'Angles', the English who came across the Pennines about AD600, and the Scandinavians who joined them around 200 years later. The names given to the rivers, hills and settlements at that time are still in use today. Kentmere was also on the drovers' trail with a steady flow of animals over the passes from Troutbeck over Garburn or from Mardale into Kentmere. From those primitive beginnings our community developed. The farmers grew all that they needed to feed themselves and could make woollen cloth for their own use. From 1274 Kentmere cloth makers stopped using the fulling mill in Kendal because they had one of their own using the plentiful water supply of the River Kent, and they could start making woollen cloth on a much larger scale.

The manorial system had its impact upon Kentmere and in the 13th century Kentmere was divided into four 'quarters' which are still referred to as Wray, Crag, Hallow Bank and Green Quarters. The Lord of the Manor had the power to raise militia from these 'quarters'. Kentmere Hall was built at this time. Sometime during the reign of Richard I, Gilbert Fitz-Reinfried became Baron of Kendale. The system of lordship was to last for centuries but by the mid 1270s Gilbert's Barony was divided up amongst heiresses and their husbands who became lords of smaller manors. Kentmere became one of those and ownership was transferred to a Yorkshire family.

Kentmere in the 14th century was comparatively wealthy and given its distance from parish church in Kendal it was likely that a chapel would be built here at that time. Legend has it that the dedication to St Cuthbert commemorates a place where the 10th century monks of Lindisfarne rested with the body of their founder on their long flight from the Vikings but there is no evidence for this. The first documentary evidence relating to St Cuthbert's Church in Kentmere is dated 1453. The building stands in

what was a circular walled area with a yew tree thought to be around 1000 years old, so it appears to be a very ancient religious site. A building very similar to the present one was described and sketched in 1693 but the building has been rebuilt and renovated several times since then. The tower was added during the most recent rebuild around 1856.

When the Industrial Revolution came, Kentmere began to lose out. It was too far from the Turnpike which ran between Kendal and Cockermouth. Farming changed too. Around 1800 wealthy outsiders began buying up the farms and investing in new methods including enclosing the common pasture and building the farms and barns many of which are still in evidence today. So the landowners and tenants turned to improving their land. Lime for treating the land was dug from a quarry above Kentmere Hall and farmers began to dig and create field drains. Many of the valley's fields are still drained by the land drains installed at that time. In the 1830s Kentmere Tarn was drained by the Wilsons of Kentmere Hall in the expectation that the reclaimed land would be of high quality. However, the land drainage schemes also caused their own problems. Drainage meant the loss of water holding bogs which maintained the steady flow of water into the river which the mills needed. The river now had extremes of high and low flows so Kentmere Reservoir was built in 1846 to control the flow of the river. One of the principle subscribers was John Hewitson Wilson who also invested heavily in the building of the Kendal to Windermere railway. He built Fellfoot Mill at the foot of the valley which was claimed to be the largest bobbin mill in the north and he also built The Abbey Hotel in Staveley.

Another important development in land management was the enclosure of the common land and this brought a massive investment in wall building and fencing, and improving land which could be ploughed and seeded. However, some of the ancient local farming customs still continue. For example the pasture at the head of Kentmere is still unenclosed and its use is still regulated by the 'cattlegates' of ancient custom. In this way, despite so much change, today's farmers are still the custodians of the landscape they and their ancestors have made.

The improved roads in the 19th century meant haulage by horse and cart became possible. This opened up a new industry as Kentmere slate became accessible to a wider market. By 1900 there were eight distinct quarries at work in the valley. Some of the quarrymen were Kentmere folk but many took lodgings here or lived here during the week at the barracks at Steel Rigg, close to the reservoir. Conditions were tough and the workers were prone to spend the weekend and all of their pay at the Lowbridge Inn. Heavy drinking was an accepted part of the farming world at sheep fairs and at shearing time but quarry workers were paid regularly and on their way home it seemed natural to them to call in at Lowbridge and spend most if not all of their money. There were no licensing hours and no limit on opening times and drunken scenes outside Kentmere's inn were brought to the notice of the Kendal magistrates who refused to renew its licence. The owners took their case to the House of Lords but they lost their appeal and there hasn't been a public house in Kentmere since. The owners of the inn had argued that the premises were useful to the tourists and those coming to fish. The reply was that only a few visitors come to Kentmere. How things have changed. Although there is a house called Low Bridge near the site of the inn, the buildings which housed the infamous establishment have long since disappeared. The house immediately across the river from the present Lowbridge house was a temperance hotel.

Kentmere's first schoolroom was built in the churchyard in the mid 18th century. It is likely that the teaching was done by John Grisenthwaite the curate who worked in Kentmere from 1792 until 1835. Apart from its appearance on a map of the time, there is little further evidence. A new school was built below the church on the road to Kentmere Hall around 1860. It would be an 'all-age' school but the coming of the Education Act in 1944 after which older pupils went to secondary school in Kendal signalled the end for small rural schools. Kentmere School closed in 1957 and most of its young pupils transferred to Ings or Staveley. The school building was converted into a dwelling.

The first Post Office to open in Kentmere was in the Temperance Hotel (now Bridge End House) in 1910. Before that the mail was delivered by the redoubtable Mrs Mary Walker who for twenty years was one of the postmen/women working out of Staveley. She is said to have walked 33,000 miles delivering mail in Kentmere. By 1914 the Kentmere Post Office had become established at Greenhead. The Edward VII pillar box, still beside the gate, dates from that time. In the 1920s The Post Office moved to Lowbridge and a new post box was built into the field wall opposite. During the Second World War the Post Office moved to Rook Howe, then, for a short time, it went to High Holme on Hellwell Lane. It moved yet again in the 1950s, this time to Brow Top Farm and then to Pumple Syke. In the 1960s it was still a Telegraph Office and was, at that time, open on 6 days a week. In 1988 the Office was recategorised as a Community Post Office and the hours of opening were reduced to only two mornings each week.

Kentmere Women's Institute was formed in 1924 and they soon decided that they needed a hut for their meetings. Their menfolk said they wouldn't build a hut, they would build a hall. The land was given. They set up a trust which collected money to build the Kentmere Institute near the church. The construction was undertaken by local craftsmen and in 1925 the opening ceremony was reported in the Westmorland Gazette which said that 300 people attended and after the ceremony they all sat down and played whist. Between 1987 and 1993 the community raised a further £42,000 to modernise its village hall.

Although trained dogs were vital to farmers there were no sheep-dog trials until 1945 when a group of farmers set up an annual meeting at Millriggs. Unfortunately the trials ceased during the Foot & Mouth outbreak of 2001 and never restarted because of more stringent DEFRA rules concerning the fields involved.

I W Johnston