A Short History of Lorton and a Village Trail

by Derek Denman

Published by Lorton Parish Council, 2024

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A Short History of LORTON and a Village Trail

Derek Denman

A LORTON PARISH COUNCIL PUBLICATION

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Cover image: The Bridge at High Lorton, seen from the South.
Photographed in August 1898 by St. Vincent Beechey, 1806-1899.

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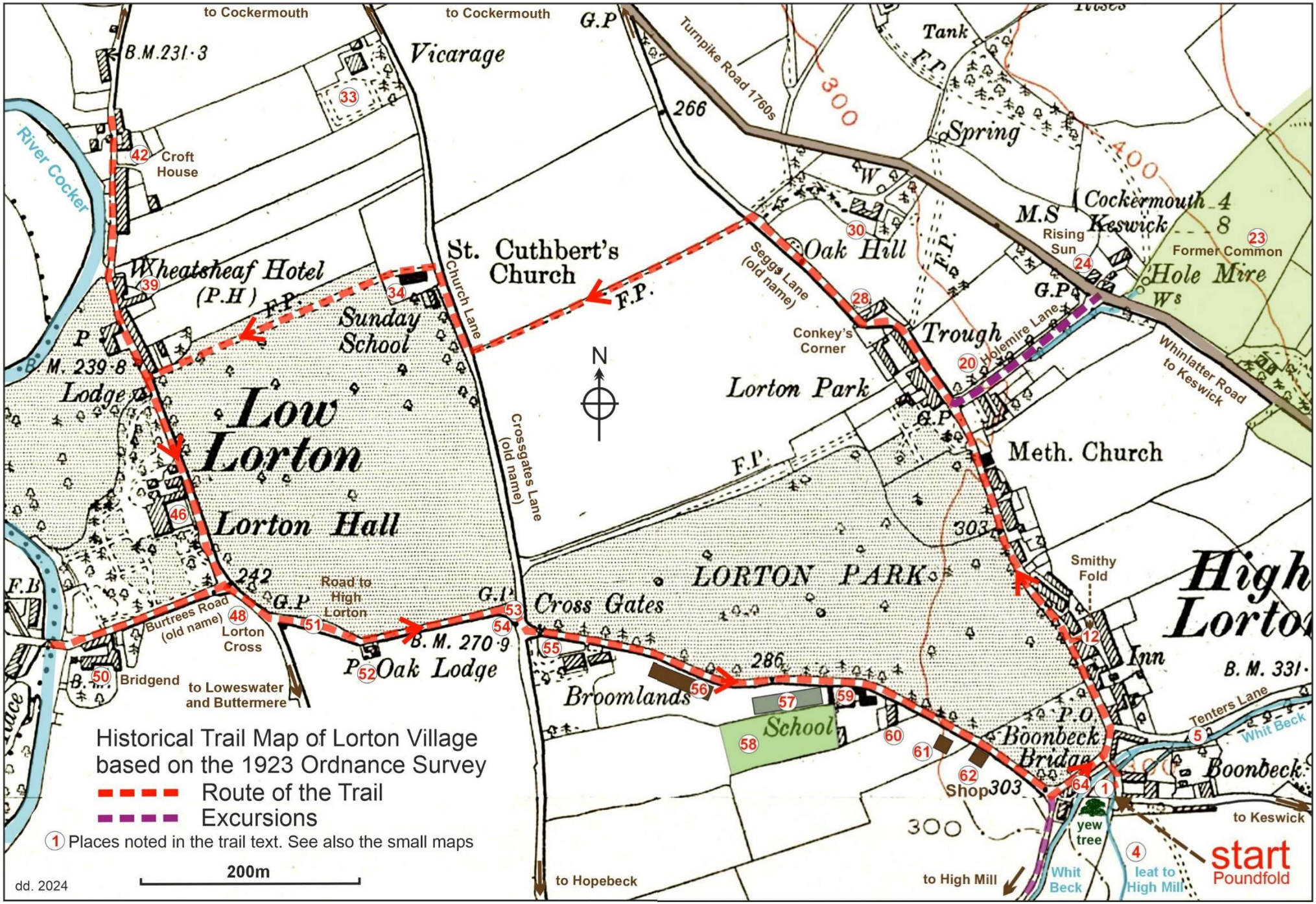
Introduction

Lorton is a civil parish in the historic county of Cumberland, England, and within the Lake District National Park. This booklet has been created for Lorton Parish Council, to provide an outline of the history of Lorton and its people since the first records of the twelfth century. This is followed by a circular historical walk around the villages of High and Low Lorton, of about 3 kilometres (2 miles), plus excursions. The walk is on roads and public footpaths, but please take care to avoid traffic on roads without footways.

A good place to start is at the 'Pound' at High Lorton, a pleasant public open space by Whit Beck, next to Lorton's famous ancient yew tree. Though the tree has been greatly reduced in size by storms, in 1819 the circumference of its trunk was recorded as 27 feet (8.2m), suggesting that the yew tree is now some 1200 years old, maybe as old as the village.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to Cockermouth
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yew tree
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leat to High Mill
start
Poundfold
to Hopebeck
to High Mill
Whit Beck
Historical Trail Map of Lorton Village
based on the 1923 Ordnance Survey
Route of the Trail
Excursions
1 Places noted in the trail text. See also the small maps
200m
dd. 2024

A Short History

There is little evidence for prehistoric settlement in Lorton, but a second-century Roman road probably ran through the Whinlatter Pass, linking the forts at Castlerigg, near Keswick, and at Papcastle, near Cockermouth. The much later settlement at Lorton took advantage of the good and well-defined agricultural land, formed from the deposits of Whit Beck as it joined the River Cocker in its 'U'-shaped glacial valley.

We have no records of Lorton before the twelfth century, but the 'ton' name suggests that its earliest settlement may have been by Anglian people by the ninth century, perhaps supplemented by Norse-Irish settlers after 900. The Normans ruled Cumberland only from 1092 to 1136, and therefore Lorton has no entry in the Domesday Book of 1086.

Lorton first appears in historical records of around 1138, at the start of the period of Scottish rule under David I. One of his knights, Ranulph de Lindesay, granted High Lorton to the Priory of Carlisle, and also granted Loweswater Chapel to the Priory at St Bees. Low Lorton does not appear in records until 1230, by which time it had also been granted as a manor, probably also in the twelfth century.

From at least the twelfth century, the settlement at Lorton comprised the two row-villages which are now High and Low Lorton, plus some peripheral ring-fenced farms. That basic medieval structure has not been over-written by modern development, though the dwellings and land are now differently used.

High and Low Lorton were separate manors, farming the enclosed land between them and to the North and South. From the early twelfth century, Lorton was in the superior forest manor of Derwentfells, the land between the Cocker and the Derwent, which became a part of the Honour of Cockermouth.

Perhaps because Lorton had multiple lordships, there was no resident medieval lord nor manor house here, as there was in Embleton. All the occupiers of farms were manorial tenants of some lord, large or small. These were mixed farms, self-sufficient in arable and pastoral products. The principal crop was oats, not wheat, and the inhabitants combined in the ploughing and harvesting of the open arable lands. The corn mill at High Lorton was the first building to be recorded, in the grant of around 1138. Low Lorton Mill is in Whinfell, over the western boundary of Lorton, the River Cocker.

For summer pasture the tenants used Derwentfells forest as a common, and it was the extent of their common which later determined the land boundaries of Lorton Township, and then the Civil Parish. Lorton commons were enclosed and divided among the landowners following an Act of Parliament of 1826.

Cattle provided dairy, meat, leather, and motive power as oxen, while sheep were kept primarily for wool, not meat. The extensive flocks of sheep, fed on the fellsides during the growing season, provided the main market income for Lorton, through the sale of either fleeces, or of woollen cloth finished at the fulling mill at Tenters.

The population of Lorton was dependent on the agricultural productivity of its land, and the population has numbered just a few hundred since the thirteenth century. The population tended to rise until no more could be supported, which made life hard and frugal. It is also important to note that before the Union of the Crowns by James I/VI in 1603, Cumberland was part of the western marches of the Scottish border. Military service was a constant and onerous duty of the tenants.

Michael, chaplain of Lorton, was recorded in 1198, which suggests a chapel in Lorton in the twelfth century, as there was in Loweswater. Before the nineteenth century there were no other buildings in the arable land between the row-villages

of High and Low Lorton. The chapel lay on the dividing line, Church Lane, between the manors of High and Low Lorton. Perhaps it was placed there to serve both existing villages.

St Cuthbert's, Lorton, was a parochial chapelry in the parish of Brigham. The sketch shows the old chapel in 1803. The chapelry, and its graveyard, also served Wythop, Buttermere, Brackenthwaite, and half of Whinfell. Today the boundary of Lorton Ecclesiastical Parish is still wider than the Civil Parish.

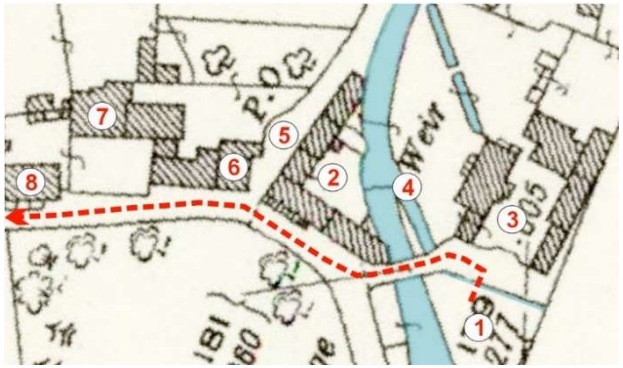
In the sixteenth century the changes wrought by Henry VIII were felt even in Lorton. The dissolution of the Priory at Carlisle resulted in their manor of High Lorton being granted in support of Carlisle Cathedral, the inhabitants remaining manorial tenants well into the twentieth century. In Low Lorton, the Winder family were lords of one third of the manor, or about six farms. In the sixteenth century they set about acquiring their tenants' farms to create Lorton Hall. Most other manorial tenants in Low Lorton gained their freeholds through the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

In the 1760s, the building of the Whinlatter turnpike road between Cockermouth and Keswick brought major change to High Lorton, while Low Lorton remained agricultural. During the nineteenth century, High Lorton took on more of the character of Cockermouth, with new dwellings and trades replacing farmsteads. As the new people moved in, the Methodist chapel was also built. In 1828 John Jennings started the brewery, and in the 1830s a new flax thread-mill, at Tenters, marked the late arrival of the industrial revolution. In the 1870s Jennings Brewery moved to Cockermouth and soon after 1900 the flax thread-mill closed and was demolished.

The arrival of local railways and imported wheat freed the village arable land for other uses, from the mid-nineteenth century. This encouraged the settlement of a new middle class, who built several villas in High Lorton, and who created Lorton Park. Social leadership, with the Victorian task of improving the inhabitants, shifted from Lorton Hall to the new families, particularly William Lancaster Alexander of Oak Hill. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries buildings grew up on the road between High and Low Lorton, starting with the school in 1809, and also along the Whinlatter turnpike road.

Though Lorton has a Yew Tree, famous from at least the seventeenth century, it is in the north-west periphery of the Lake District, and so did not develop a significant tourist trade. Through the twentieth century, Lorton retained its pastoral agriculture and its traditional trades: joiners, blacksmiths, hospitality, and shopkeeping, supplemented by forestry, agricultural engineering, and a garage/taxi business.

With an accessible location and two village centres, Lorton provided a focus for social and sporting activities. Community activity was focused on the Church , the School, and the Yew Tree Hall, which was created in the disused Jennings malt house. Lorton is fortunate to retain a primary school, a Church, a shop, a pub, a village hall, and a popular tennis club, all now serving areas considerably wider than Lorton itself.



A Village Trail

High Lorton

This 3 kilometre trail is shown on the map on pages 2&3. The Pound, (1) where this walk starts and finishes, was once a poundfold where stray animals were kept until their owners claimed them and paid a fine. This area was more open before the brewery (2) was built, with only Boon Beck farmstead (3) existing before 1800. Boon Beck's rebuilt Georgian farmhouse is shown below. 'Boon' in Lorton meant 'above' and so Boon Beck was the farm above Whit Beck, over the bridge.

Before the Whinlatter turnpike road and the New Bridge were built in the 1760s, the old highway passed through High Lorton and over this bridge to Keswick. The leat supplying water to the corn mill, started at the weir (4).

High Lorton was a medieval row-village of farmsteads, growing oats on the open arable land immediately to the West, now Lorton Park. In 1649, Boon Beck farm was at the southern end of the row.

Go back over the bridge and turn right, past the brewery buildings to Tenters Lane (5). Higher up Whit Beck was a fulling mill, or walk mill, which was used to wash, to felt, and finish the woollen cloth made from the fleeces of local sheep. The Tenter Riggs were the structures on which the cloth was stretched out to dry.

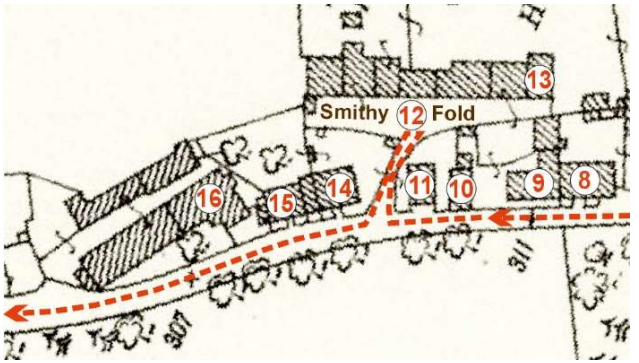
Across Tenters Lane, Corner House (6) was built by 'Old Bill' Jennings in 1809, as his maltster's premises. His son, John, would start the brewery in 1828. This premises was later used by the Moffat family as the village grocery shop and Post Office, shown above around 1900.

The next old farmhouse (7), is called Graceholme after the owner in 1900, Grace Musgrave. The farmhouse had been gentrified in the eighteenth century.

Yew Tree Cottage (8) marks the start of two old farmsteads which were developed for housing and trades, from the seventeenth century. Two houses were then redeveloped in the 1880s to create

Dale View (9), by Joseph Burns, the local builder. His joiners' shop (10) and George Scott's first garage (11) are now gardens.

After WWI George Scott started his Hackney Carriage service, and built this first garage in 1921, later adding petrol pumps, as shown below around 1930.



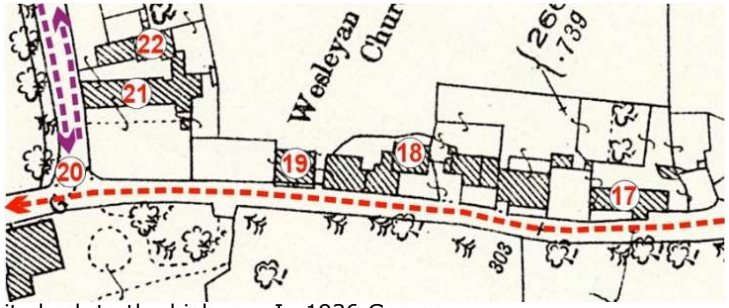
Smithy Fold (12) illustrates the layout of the 'great rebuilding' of High Lorton in the later seventeenth century. Each farmstead usually had two rows of buildings, the barns backed onto the arable land with the farmhouses facing a yard or fold. The highway developed to the west of the buildings, along the edge of the arable land.

Smithy Fold became the centre of High Lorton, with a joiner's, blacksmith's, general housing, and a pub, first called the Blacksmith's Arms (13). It became the Horse Shoe, shown bottom left, and closed in the 1980s.

Leaving Smithy Fold, Beech Cottage (14) is another seventeenth century house which became the first home of John Jennings, the brewer to be, and his heiress wife, Anne Wilkinson, after their marriage in 1811. Causey Cottage was a small Victorian barn conversion.

Kent Cottage (15) was built onto Beech Cottage's barn in the later eighteenth century, but on land taken from the next old farmstead, known as Midtown (16).

Midtown, shown below in 2000, is the best-preserved seventeenth century farmhouse in High Lorton, but it presents



its back to the highway. In 1936 George Scott moved his family into the farmhouse, and his garage into the barn. The barn was later converted into dwellings, as was Fellbarrow (17) and many others.

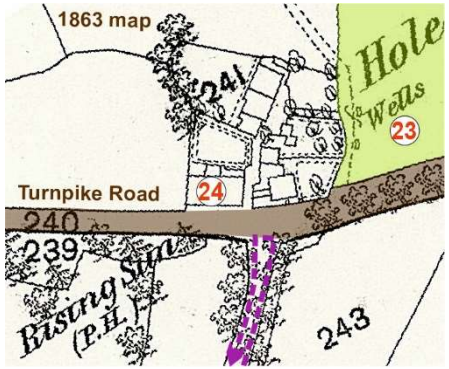
Between Fellbarrow and the Methodist Chapel, redundant farmsteads were replaced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by dwellings and work places. In 1800, Spring Garth (18) was the home and shop of the Turrel family. 'They sold tea & coffee, tobacco & snuff & it was a noted shop for marbles & mint cake'.

The Wesleyan Methodist Chapel (19) was built in 1840, but meetings were being held long before at Midtown. As an agricultural community, Lorton had been almost wholly Anglican, with Quakers settling west of the Cocker. Methodism attracted the new non-agricultural population of High Lorton

At the junction with Holemire Lane (20), a large barn was removed a hundred years ago. In 1649 this barn, with Lambfold (21) and White Ash (22), formed a single farmstead, which was divided into two farms. White Ash had an extended agricultural life as the home farm of the Lorton Park estate.

Holemire lane was once a muddy lane to the common, and marked the end of the old row on this side of the highway.

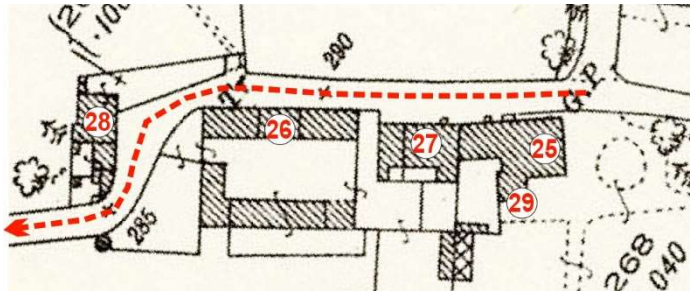
Excursion to Holemire



If wished, stroll up Holemire Lane to the Whinlatter Road. This turnpike road was built in the 1760s and at this point the new toll road from Cockermouth to Keswick came out of the enclosed lands and onto the common (23), shown in green, where the land could be used without payment. The improved connection by good roads transformed High Lorton.

The Rising Sun (24), was built in the late eighteenth century as a coaching inn convenient for Lorton. The name Rising Sun seems strange in this location, and the current Mountain View is more logical.

The development of housing along the turnpike road followed the enclosure of the commons from 1826 to 1835, when many small allotments of land were made to the property owners of High Lorton.



Lorton Park

Returning to High Lorton, the rest of the street to the West became part of the estate of Lorton Park. The mansion itself, called Lorton House (25), was built by the Dodgsons of Embleton around 1828, but the mid-century growth of the estate was the work of the related Harbord family, of Liverpool. The Misses Harbord are shown below at Lorton Park in 1898.

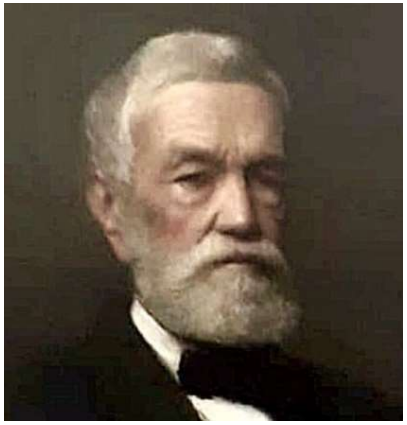
The Lorton diet changed from using local oats to imported wheat, allowing the Harbord family to purchase the arable land of High Lorton, for their park.

Buildings were converted to provide the stables (26) and cottages for the workers (27 & 28). However, much remains of the older buildings. Even in the main house, the square kitchen block (29) was previously the village bakehouse, run by Isabella Benson.

The cottages at (28) were formerly an old farmstead from 1700, simply divided and embellished. This area was more recently known as Conkey's corner. Their son, Bill Conkey, was a champion fell runner at the Grasmere sports in 1938.

Road to the Church

Continue around Conkey's corner and along Seggs Lane to the footpath on the left to the Church. The footpath also continues to the right, going over the fells to Wythop, whose dead were buried at Lorton until 1865.



Just before that footpath lies Oakhill (30 on page 3), which formed, together with Lorton Park and Fairfield, a group of houses of a new middle class, with business interests in Whitehaven and Liverpool.

William Lancaster Alexander, 1821-1910, above, lived at Oakhill from 1870. He was a generous benefactor of Lorton.

Take the footpath on the left and cross the arable land which once fed High Lorton. Turn right onto Church Lane, which formed part of a 2.5km road dividing High and Low Lorton.

A gate (31) provides a good distant view of the old hall-range of Lorton Hall (46 page 13). The Hall is dated 1663, when John Winder rebuilt the sixteenth-century original hall, with a second floor for his large family. The tower is Victorian.

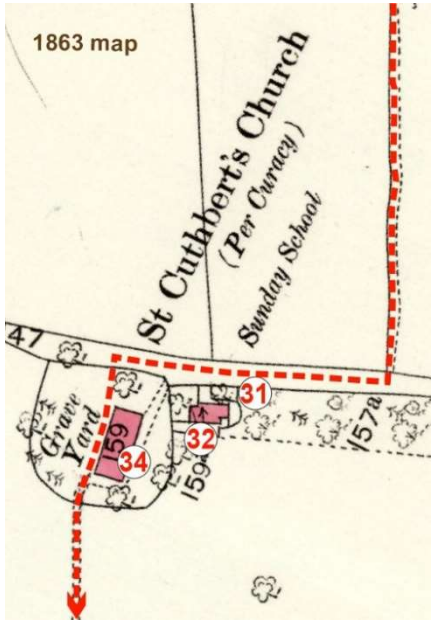
St Cuthbert's Church

The Sunday School (32) was donated in memory of Robert Bridge. He married into the Bragg family, who held Lorton Hall and estate from 1800. Four of the Bragg siblings were subject to commissions of lunacy, and lived on at the hall until the last died in 1875.

Entering the churchyard, the graves of the Braggs are on the right, under the old beech tree. Some time spent reading the other memorial inscriptions will give a feel for the families and individuals whose lives were spent building and working in the village that remains today.

The Winder Vault, which is noted by the east wall, does not exist. The vault notice, and the heraldry inside the Church, were the work of an imaginative vicar.

Lorton was a parochial chapelry in the parish of Brigham, with a curate officiating, until Lorton was raised to parish status in 1883. The vicarage (33



page 2) was built in the 1890s. New parishes created in Wythop, Buttermere, and Loweswater, reduced Lorton's area, though the dead of Buttermere are still buried at Lorton.

Lorton has been in the Diocese of Carlisle only since 1856, being previously in the Diocese of Chester from 1541, and before that, in Catholic times, in the diocese of York.

The Church (34), was rebuilt in 1807-9 on the same footings as before, but now with a tower instead of the simple bell frame shown on page 5.

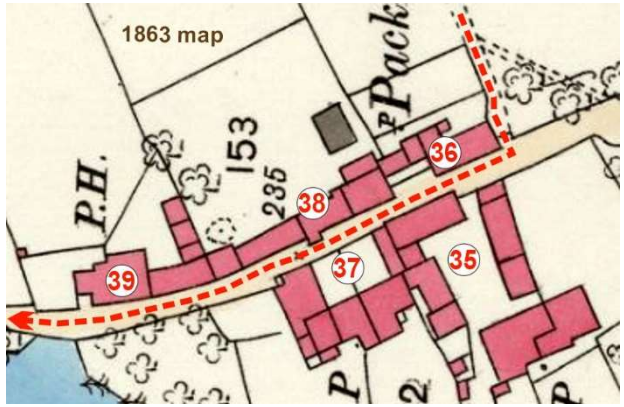
As well as being a focus for the religious, social, and cultural life of the parish, the vestry meeting also had civil responsibilities in Lorton township before the Civil Parish was created; for example for the poor and the highways.

Leave the churchyard by the south gate to Low Lorton. The footpath ends at Kirkgate End, the end of the road to the kirk, a name which was used to identify the farmsteads here. Turn right here.

Low Lorton

While High Lorton had its properties reused, many in agricultural Low Lorton have gone. There were two farmsteads here. The one called the Churchstile Farm in the nineteenth century (35) was replaced by Lorton Hall Lodge in the 1890s.

The other farmstead (36) probably provided stabling and accommodation for chapel visitors in medieval



daughters. Two of these mini-manors were to the South of the road to the Church and one was to the North.

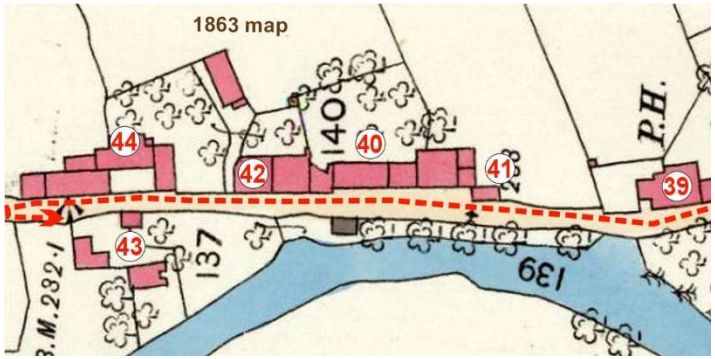
In Low Lorton the highway developed through the yards or folds of the farmstead. So that going north past Pack Horse Cottage, the next farmstead, Holme Farm, formerly had its buildings on both sides of the road. Holme Cottage (37), below, is a fine farmhouse and barn surviving from the seventeenth-century rebuilding. The buildings opposite (38) were used as Lorton's men's 'reading room' in the twentieth century, and then as the Low Lorton shop.

Continuing, the Wheatsheaf (39), shown on page 12, was a Jennings pub converted from an old farmhouse and barn, by the 1840s. It is now Lorton's only pub, and a good place for a break.

times. In 1734 it was rebuilt as the Pack Horse Inn by Thomas and Mary Barnes, as the inscription over the door shows.

This Alfred Pettitt photograph of the 1870s may show the landlady, Sarah Beatty, 1832-89. The Pack Horse had closed as a public house by 1901.

By 1305 the manor of Low Lorton had been divided into three equal holdings, probably due to a lord having no sons and three



House (43) was home to Low Lorton's last carpenter, joiner, and wheelwright, Joseph Hardisty. The blacksmith and joiner should be close because many products were made from metal and wood.

Croft House (44) at the end of the old row, has had a Georgian upgrade, probably by the Pearson's. They were the leading yeoman family in Low Lorton, being also at Holme Farm and Bridge End.

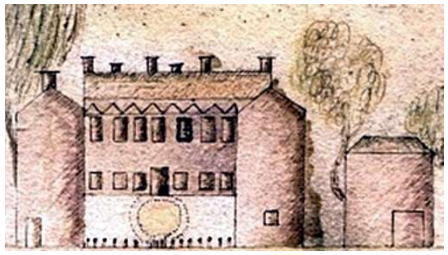
Returning carefully to Kirkgate End, you reach the carriage drive (45) of Lorton Hall (46), now Winder Hall, which was part of major changes and additions in the 1840s. The Winders acquired the lordship of the middle third of Low Lorton in about 1387, which ran from here to the other entrance (47). They acquired the farmsteads and land of the tenants to build their hall and grounds.

The next buildings (40), are mostly remains and conversions of long-disused old farmsteads.

Notice a small building (41) with an inscription over an old doorway, shown below. Mark Williamson, born 1643, was a yeoman farmer and freeholder here in 1679, with his wife A---. By 1578 his ancestors had purchased their freehold from the lord of the manor, perhaps the earliest enfranchisement in Lorton.

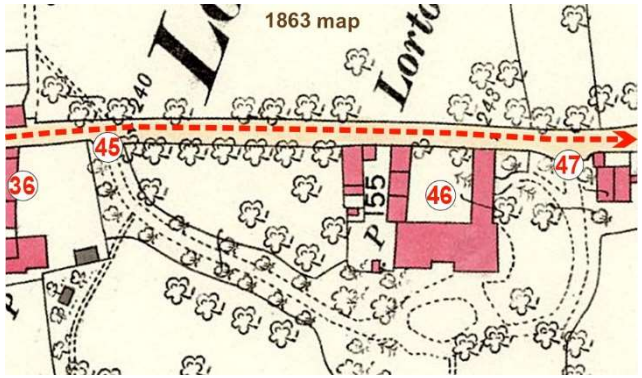
Further down the road, Smithy Cottage (42) was the workshop of the last blacksmith in Low Lorton, while Lime Tree

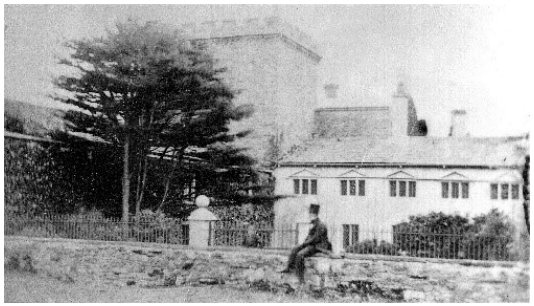
The Winders left Lorton in 1699, and the sketch of Lorton Hall in 1803, below, taken from the road, probably shows the hall as the Winders sold it.



Dated 1663, the entrance was directly from the road. The wing to the right was stabling, while that to the left was demolished in around 1890. No tower is shown. The tower appears to have been built by George Bragg in the 1840s, without windows.

The photograph, below, probably shows young Anthony Dixon on the field wall in the 1880s, before he set about changing the work of the Braggs, including adding windows to their folly tower, and adding the new grand rooms with the south aspect. The Dixons created a large estate and swept away much of old Low Lorton. They sold the estate in lots in 1947.

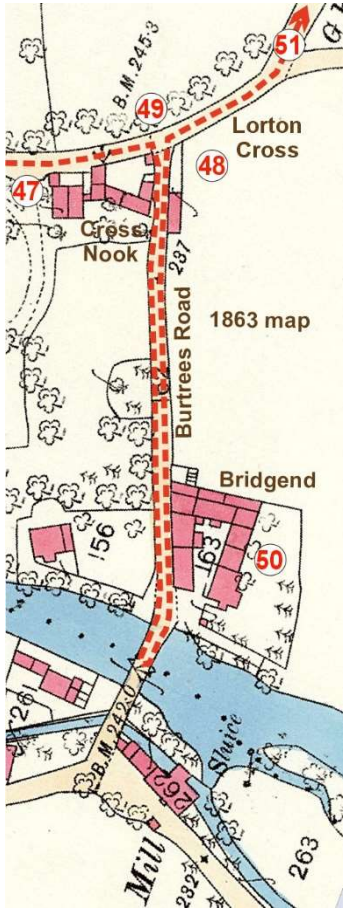




Beyond the entrance to Lorton Hall Tower (47), previously 'Kiln Lonning', was the third small lordship, belonging to Robert Sandes of Rottington in 1578. He sold all of this property to his manorial tenants in 1596.

The general area (48) was called Lorton Cross, and the road to the river was called Burtrees (Elder) Road. There was a considerable settlement at Lorton Cross, as shown on the 1863 map, and there were earlier buildings east of the road (49). The Dixons demolished that settlement around 1890 and built the wall around Lorton Hall.

Bridgend (50) was a large farm when sold to John Pearson in 1596, and it is recorded in 1517. That probably makes Low Lorton bridge a medieval bridge. A later two-arched bridge was swept away by floods in 2009. It was replaced by an attractive single-span bridge, reusing the old stone for the parapet walls.



Lorton's parish boundary is the river Cocker, over which is Whinfell in Blindbothel Civil Parish.

Road to High Lorton
(see map on pages 2&3)

Return to Lorton Cross and take the road to High Lorton (51). This highway is late or post-medieval, cutting across the lines of furrows in the old open-arable fields. Earlier there would be no field walls within the arable land. Animals were kept out during the growing season. In 1649 this was the 'highway to the common', which Low Lorton inhabitants would use to tend to their animals on the common, including for milking.

There were no buildings on this road before 1800. Oak Lodge (52) was built in 1885 for the Dixons of Lorton Hall.

At Crossgates (53), the arrangement of walls and the gates suggest that this area was used for marshalling stock, crossing between Low and High Lorton. A daughter-tree (54) of the ancient yew was planted here in 2004, commemorating a visit of William and Dorothy Wordsworth in 1804.

The mansion Broomlands (55) was built in 1874 by Moffat Towers, a local farmer. The name comes from 'Brooms', the name of the old open-arable field here.

After WWI, forestry started on Whinlatter and brought employment to Lorton. The row of houses (56) was built for workers.

Sports and social activities have always been important in Lorton village. The tennis club (57), has run for a hundred years. The image below records a tournament in the 1930s.

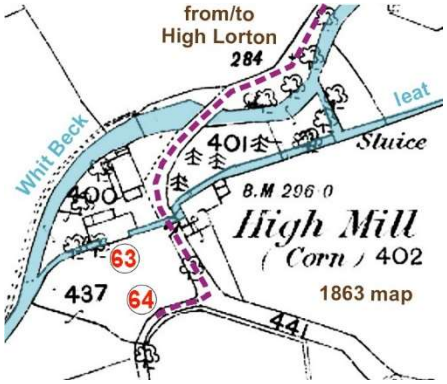
The Parish Field (58) is a public open space which was donated for a children's playing field in 1935, commemorating the Silver Jubilee of George V. The image above shows the School Sports in the 1930s.

The school (59) was built in 1809, and later extended. It was supported by both Anglicans and Methodists. In 1841, High Lorton was home to 53 children, under 15, a third of its population. The 1930s school children shown above, dressed for a play, represent much larger numbers; 100 local pupils in 1879. Lorton now has the only primary school in the valley.

School House (60) was an example of the generosity of W L Alexander of Oakhill. The Old Police House (61) was home to the village policemen until 1982.

Shops and workshops of various trades were common in the nineteenth century, but Lorton is fortunate to retain just one shop. The wooden building itself (62) was brought for the shop in the 1920s by Leslie Milburn, being surplus at Gretna after WWI.

Excursion to High Mill



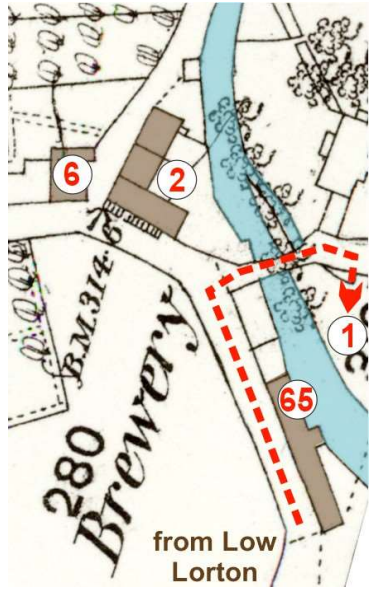
If time permits, take the twelfth-century road to the right for 400m to High Mill (63). The mill would grind mainly oats and some barley. Before drying kilns were used, the inhabitants would need to attend the mill about every three weeks to have their grain ground.

High Mill operated, with gaps, until the 1880s. The machinery of the last mill has been preserved, and the breast-shot wheel has been rebuilt.

The mill was once a busy place and this road was probably the medieval route to Hopebeck and Buttermere. It is now a footpath, from which the mill wheel can be seen at (64). Return to High Lorton.

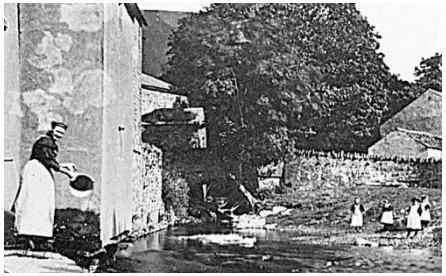
Lorton Industries

Lorton developed two nineteenth-century industries, the brewery and the flax thread-mill. Both derived from local trades, and involved the Jennings family.



The first brewery, seen above, was established by John Jennings by 1828, when the works (2) had been built on land purchased by William Jennings in 1809, when he built his maltster's premises (6). The later malt house (65) may date from the 1830s.

The brewery established local outlets for its Lorton Ale, including the Wheatsheaf and the Horse Shoe. Jennings brewery opened in Cockermouth in 1874 and Lorton closed in 1879.



The 1898 view of Whit Beck, above, shows the back of the malt house, and children in the pound (1). In 1909 the redundant malt house was rented as the Yew Tree Hall, and was purchased in 1920. The image below shows a Women's Institute dance in the 1950s.

In about 1835 the site of the ancient Tenters fulling mill on Whit Beck (not on the trail map) was re-used for a flax thread-mill, making embroidery and other threads. Water-power and good roads made the site attractive. Irish flax was imported through Workington. It became a major employer. The photograph above is from 1898.

By 1851 John Jennings owned the business. A steam engine was fitted later, but the thread mill closed before 1912, and was demolished

The Famous Yew Tree

Complete the walk by crossing the bridge to the Pound (1).

The famous Lorton yew tree has its own interpretation board. The tree is best known from Wordsworth's poem, *Yew Trees*, published in 1815.

George Fox, the founding Quaker, noted in 1653 'a yew tree; which was so full of people that I feared they would break it down'. When shown the tree by Wordsworth in 1799, Coleridge recorded that 'a yew prodigious in size & complexity of numberless branches flings itself on one side entirely over the river, … . On its branches names numberless carved – some of the names being grown up appear in alto relievo …'.

Hannah Cowley, the playwright, wrote of it in 1794. Even in its reduced state it was a landmark for Harriet Martineau's *Guide to the Lakes* in 1855, and an inspiration for Canon Rawnsley's *Lake Country Sketches* in 1903. It is still the Pride of Lorton Vale.

Thank you for your interest in Lorton's history. Please kindly observe privacy, prioritise safety, and keep to public rights of way when exploring our village. More history can be found in the archive of Lorton & Derwent Fells LHS at
https://derwentfells.org.uk
More general information is at
https://melbreakcommunities.org.uk

To find out more about the wildlife in Lorton, please visit our wildlife board located next to the bus shelter in Low Lorton.

Lorton Parish Council would like to thank Derek Denman for his dedication and hard work in the production of both this booklet and the History of Lorton Interpretation Panel. His expertise and enthusiasm has been invaluable.

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Lorton in Cumberland is a village in the Lake District National Park which has retained its basic form and its ancient yew tree for perhaps 1200 years.

This booklet provides a short history of the Civil Parish of Lorton, plus a walking trail of about 3 kilometres (2 Miles) through High and Low Lorton. It gives an introduction to the history of the people, buildings, and land-use, from the twelfth to the twentieth centuries.

£3.00