

### 3.4 How the Land was Farmed

*Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,  
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe\* has broke;  
How jocund did they drive their team afield!  
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!*

From Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'

During the survey we found a great deal of archaeological evidence relating to farming and food production from the earliest settlement through to recent decades. Much of the rural landscape that we see today is the product of thousands of years of grazing and cultivation. Attempting to unravel the phases of this process from the features that remain was a fascinating challenge that led to many enthusiastic debates.

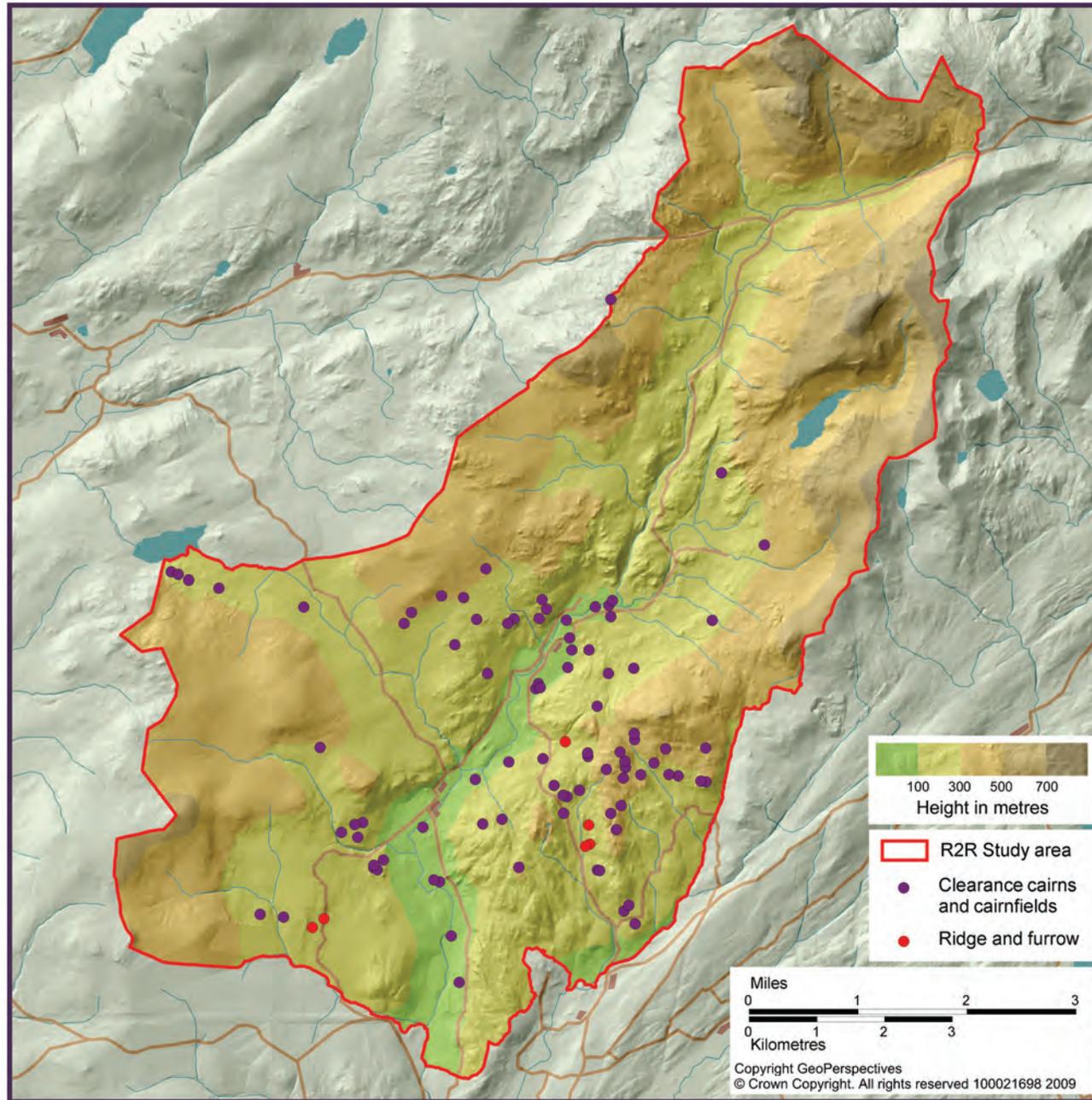
Clearance cairns are the earliest evidence of farming and we found such cairns in abundance during the survey (Map 6). They are the result of early farmers clearing areas of surface stone to enable the land to be used for agriculture. This would have begun in association with deforestation, enabling stock to graze. Domesticated animals and crops were

\* Middle English for clod of earth

introduced in the Neolithic period after *c.* 4,000 BC. However there is no clear evidence to tell us when the earliest cairns that we recorded were created. Some are likely to date from the Bronze Age if not earlier. The upland areas would have always been marginal land, farmed only under pressure of population density and when the climate permitted. Consequently adjacent cairns may well date from different eras. The density of the cairns in some areas

**Map 6** Clearance cairns, cairnfields and areas of ridge and furrow recorded by the R2R project. This shows that agriculture (both pastoral and arable) was widespread in the past in the southern Duddon Valley, and much of it occurred at altitudes (100-500 metres) where peat growth is now dominant due to increased rainfall over the last 3000 years.

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**Photo 19** The densely cairned area above Stonestar. Team members are standing on some of the cairns

is startling; for example, at Stonestar (Photo 19), Kiln Bank and below Hesk Fell where literally hundreds of cairns are found within less than one square kilometre of ground. Clearance cairns can be distinguished from other types of cairn by the random size of the stones and their irregular shape and size.

We do not know when the first fields were created. However amongst the clearance cairnfields we recorded the remains of walled enclosures of varying shapes and sizes (Photo 20). Associated with these we found ancient wall systems (Photo 21). In places these meander across long stretches of fellside. These features are thought to date from the medieval period though some may be earlier. We noted that the walls are generally very low and it has been suggested that this may be because the breeds of cattle kept in the

past were much shorter-legged creatures than those reared today; one group actually nick-named them ‘udder rubbers’ on this basis! These low walls would have served to prevent cattle from straying onto the crags above. Relict walls were also found lower down within the current field system, tracing an outline of bygone field shapes. In some places the walls are very wide and appear as double-sided structures in-filled with smaller stones, thereby serving the double function of absorbing stone for clearance and enclosing the land (Photo 22; Aerial Photo 3). These are known as consumption walls or dykes. Some examples are exceptionally large, such as at Low Hall.

Many other features associated with grazing are found on the unenclosed fells, some of which gave us insight into the work and life of sheep farmers before



**Photo 20** The walled enclosure on Hesk Fell

modern day farming methods evolved. All four survey groups recorded fine examples of sheepfolds (see Map 7). These were used to provide shelter for sheep during severe weather and to gather them prior to dipping, clipping, sorting and treating. The circular sheepfolds of the open fells tend to be located where a water supply is available for the sheep. Many also have washfolds nearby (Photos 23 and 24). Here the walls of the fold are shaped to funnel the sheep towards a nearby stream. The stream would be dammed to provide sufficient depth in which to immerse the sheep. Examples can be found at Stephenson Ground, Sele Bottom, Hollow Moss beck and Wallowbarrow. Many sheepfolds adjoin the intake wall, that is the wall that borders the open fell. Here we found that they tend to be four-sided and

divided internally into separate walled areas. Another feature that we found located near to some of the folds were smaller 'mini-folds' (Photo 25). These are just large enough for one or two sheep. Their function is uncertain but they were probably used to isolate sick sheep. Lower down such small folds are known as 'mothering pens' and were used to encourage a sheep that had lost its lamb to adopt and feed an orphaned lamb. We also noted some structures that appear to have been shepherds' shelters, also known as bothies. However, it is difficult to distinguish these from the shielings or temporary dwellings mentioned above. Foxes presented a threat to the flock and we recorded a few stone built fox-traps; for example, on the slopes above Seathwaite Tarn. These are bowl-shaped structures with an





**Photo 23** A sheepfold and sheep-wash above Stephenson Ground



**Photo 24** Circular sheepfold and sheep-wash by Hollow Moss Beck

overhanging rim. Food would be left inside to lure the unsuspecting fox who having entered the trap would be unable to escape.

The walls that enclose the contemporary field systems are a feature of the landscape that we tend to take for granted. The teams that surveyed the fields embarked on the task with little expectation of recording many remarkable features. We were soon surprised to discover that the walls contain a wealth of interest. They vary in age and in the extent to which they are maintained by the current landowners. Many are beautiful structures in their own right, reflecting the great craftsmanship of their builders. Some walls have made use of exceptionally large boulders, for

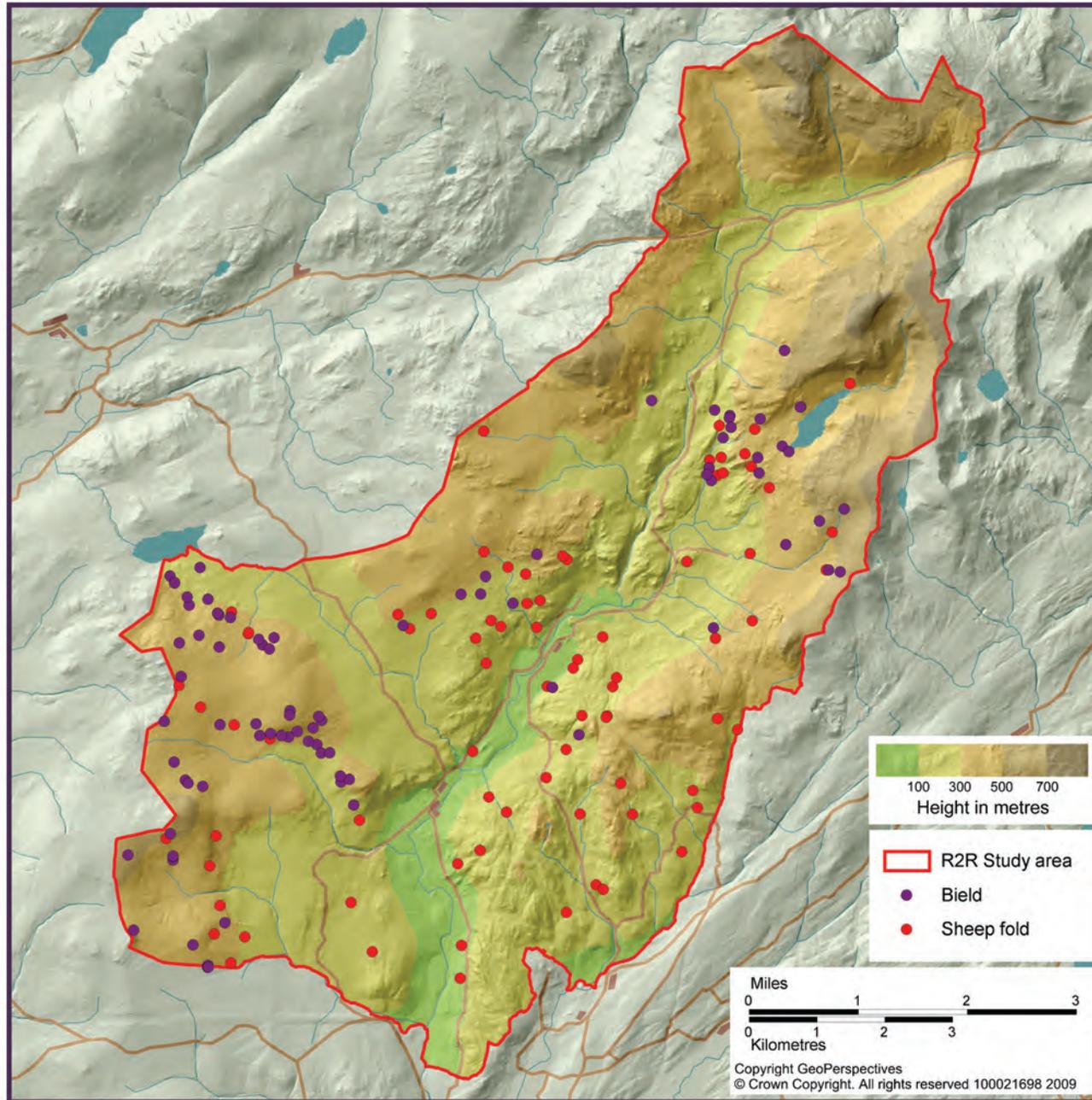
example, the walls near Low Hall. Another type of wall that we recorded in many locations are shard, or flag, walls constructed with upright slate flags, for example, at Carter Ground (Photo 26) and near the Lickle River at Green Bank.

The most common wall features that we noted were hogg holes. These are small, usually rectangular, triangular or arched holes built into the base of the wall and supported by a lintel. They are just large enough to allow young sheep or 'hoggs' to pass through to graze on fresh grass whilst preventing access to the older sheep. Some hogg holes are strikingly unusual or attractive (Photos 27–30). For example, at Scithwaite Farm we found triangular

**Photo 21** (*Left, top*) Ancient wall systems were found in many locations. This example meanders across the slopes of Caw

**Photo 22** (*Left, bottom*) A 'consumption wall' absorbing a vast quantity of clearance stone in fields near Hall Dunnerdale

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**Photo 25** A 'mini-fold' located near to a larger sheep fold above Stonestar



**Photo 26** 'Shard' or 'flag' walling at Carter Ground

shaped holes constructed out of broken gate stoops. Many hogg holes have a stone step stile for the shepherd located nearby. We found many other examples of step stiles and also squeeze stiles, many of which lived up to their name and were a very tight squeeze to pass through!

In some places we recorded small holes located near to the top of the walls forming a storage space. These are known as raddle or smitt shelves both being names for the red marking dye used by shepherds (Photo 31). Within one such hole we found the remains of an old, forged shepherd's knife. The farmer told us that this would have been

used to clean the sheep's hooves. At The Low we recorded a wall that has a row of six such shelves of varying sizes. Their specific use remains uncertain.

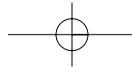
Gate stoops, often taken for granted but gradually disappearing from the rural landscape, gave us another focus of interest. We learned about the original design of the five-bar gate where the bars were set into a round-holed stoop on one side and a square-holed stoop on the other. Occasionally we were delighted to find inscriptions on the stoop such as initials or a date, for example, near Ulpha church, at Green Bank farm and near Carter Ground (Photos 32 and 33).

Where streams meet the walls we noted many

**Map 7** Remains of biolds and sheepfolds recorded by the R2R project. This map supports the information presented in Map 6, indicating that stock-rearing in the past was very widespread in the Duddon Valley, particularly at altitudes between 100 and 500 metres.



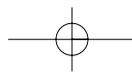
**Aerial photo 3** An area just to the south of Grassguards Farm showing a range of different types and ages of drystone walls. The higher walls with the strongest shadows are post-medieval (e.g. centre left, with sheepfolds at the corners), but lower walls that probably date from the medieval period can also be seen. The 'cyclopean' walls at top right surrounding the oblong green field are much thicker and higher than normal post-medieval structures, and have been termed 'consumption' walls because they were used as a means of disposing of excess stone. The triangular grey structure between the thickest wall and the woods on the right is a very large consumption cairn. (© English Heritage. NMR)

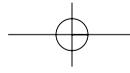


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**Photos 27, 28, 29, 30** A selection of unusual and attractive hogg holes





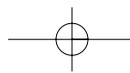
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**Photo 31** (*left*) A shepherds 'smitt' or 'raddle' shelf/hole near Green Bank farm

**Photo 32** (*below left*) The dated gate stoop near Ulpha Church

**Photo 33** (*below*) Named and dated inscription on a gate stoop near Carter Ground





**Photo 34** A water yeat near Carter Ground

examples of water yeats (Photo 34). These usually consist of a set of stone bars set through a gap in the wall allowing the water to flow without damaging the wall structure or permitting sheep to pass.

We also recorded smoots which are a less common wall feature consisting of a very small hole constructed into the base of a wall (Photo 35). These enable rabbits, hares or even badgers to pass through rather than digging underneath and damaging the wall structure. At the same time they could be used for trapping rabbits.

In addition to the walls, the fields themselves held much interest. We became aware of the complex drainage systems that channel water from fell to valley. A good example is the culverted fields near Hall Dunderdale. Most of this drainage occurs underground. Although constructed when the fields were first created the channels have had to be continuously maintained and upgraded through to the present day to prevent flooding.



**Photo 35** A rabbit smoot near Green Bank farm

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Today stock rearing is the predominant farming activity in the two parishes. However, some fields and areas of open fell reveal evidence of former cultivation. Raised 'rigs' and deep 'furrows' created by horse or ox-drawn ploughs leave a corrugated imprint on the land. This is especially visible in low winter sunlight. Some of these areas are likely to offer evidence of medieval farming, although we know from documentary sources that intermittent cultivation continued into the twentieth century particularly in times of food shortages during and after the two World Wars (see Map 6 and Photos 36 and 37).

As we walked over the fields we encountered numerous barns in varying states of preservation (Photo 38). We noted that those near occupied farms

**Photo 36** Rig and furrow in fields near Picthall Ground



**Photo 37** Rig and furrow at Gaitscale ruined farmstead

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tended to be in good repair and remain in some form of use. Bank barns are a traditional Lake District farm building and we recorded some fine examples at Carter Ground and Stephead Farm. These barns are typically built along the contours of a slope. They combine a conventional threshing barn on the higher level accessed from a track above, with a byre or stable on the lower level opening onto the farmyard below. The many field barns that we recorded would have originally been built to store and process grain crops such as oats and barley. As farming became mechanised, their use changed to hay storage, and many are now redundant. In some places we recorded examples of cruck-framed barns; for example, Stickle barn and Stephenson Ground barn .



**Photo 38** One of the many disused and ruined field barns recorded in the survey



**Photo 39** A fine example of a cruck frame barn