

THIRLMERE

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Summary Description

2.c.10 THE THIRLMERE VALLEY



“...take a flight of not more than four or five miles eastward to the ridge of Helvellyn and you will look down upon Wytheburn and St. John’s Vale...”

William Wordsworth, ‘Guide to the Lakes’ (1835)

DESCRIPTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Though relatively small in area compared to other Lake District valleys, Wythburn, (more often known as Thirlmere because of the reservoir it contains) is a large-scale, steep-sided, glaciated upland valley visually dominated by a large reservoir and the vast areas of conifers planted to protect soils and water quality within the catchment. It lies north of the Dunmail Raise watershed, the physical and psychological boundary between the south and north Lake District, before reaching an abrupt end against the bulk of the Skiddaw and Blencathra massif. To the east is the valley of Ullswater, to the south Grasmere, Rydal and Ambleside, and to the west and north Borrowdale and Bassenthwaite.



FIGURE 2.c.10.1 Aerial view of the Thirlmere valley, looking north from above Dunmail Raise

Figure 2.c.10.2 Thirlmere Valley Illustrative Map



- Agro-pastoral landscape
- Aesthetic appreciation
- Conservation



1. Castleterrig Stone Circle (owned by National Trust)
2. Shoulthwaite Hillfort
3. Remains of shielings north of Clough Fold
4. Dalehead Hall
5. Castleterrig Hall
6. Fornsidge
7. Hollin Root Old House
8. Steel End Farm
9. Sosgill packhorse bridge
10. Helvellyn
11. Thirlmere

EXAMPLES OF KEY ATTRIBUTES: As shown on the Thirlmere illustrative map



NO. 1 FIGURE 2.c.10.3 Castlerigg Stone Circle (owned by National Trust)



NO. 2 FIGURE 2.c.10.4 Shoulthwaite Hillfort



NO. 3 FIGURE 2.c.10.5 Remains of shielings north of Clough Fold



NO. 4 FIGURE 2.c.10.6 Dalehead Hall



NO. 5 FIGURE 2.c.10.7 Castlerigg Hall



NO. 6 FIGURE 2.c.10.8 Fornside



NO. 7 FIGURE 2.c.10.9 Hollin Root Old House



NO. 8 FIGURE 2.c.10.10 Steel End Farm



NO. 9 FIGURE 2.c.10.11 Sosgill packhorse bridge



NO. 10 FIGURE 2.c.10.12 Helvellyn



NO. 11 FIGURE 2.c.10.13 Thirlmere

The flooding of a Lake District valley in the late 19th century was hugely controversial at the time and precipitated the development of an organised landscape conservation movement nationally. The story of Thirlmere is a fascinating record of the recognition of the landscape as a national asset, but eventually the needs of a fast growing urban population were deemed by Parliament to outweigh the modification of a landscape renowned for its great natural beauty. The first water was delivered from the reservoir to the city of Manchester in 1894. Despite modification, the valley still has the drama of its soaring fellsides, a large body of water, and north of the reservoir the rural charm of St John's in the Vale. It is stunning scenery and its record of the adaptation of landscape to meet the needs of a changing society, and the arguments for not doing so, are a fascinating and integral part of the evolution of the English Lake District landscape.



FIGURE 2.c.10.14 View of St John's in the Vale, looking south, with the Helvellyn ridge on the eastern side of the valley

The early agricultural landscape of Thirlmere has been largely covered by the reservoir and forestry plantations, but remnants of the field pattern can be seen around the water's edge and in other parts of the valley. Settlement in Thirlmere now consists of dispersed, single farmsteads, including a number of 17th century farms, with a small hamlet at Legburthwaite. However, in the past there were more substantial hamlets, which were inundated by the reservoir. This was also the fate of one of the most substantial houses in the valley, at Armboth. Key vernacular buildings which escaped the flooding include Dalehead Hall, a late 16th to 19th century house owned by the Leathes family until it was sold to the Manchester Corporation. In addition there is a fine packhorse bridge of the 18th century date at Sosgill in St John's in the Vale and Wythburn church, at the southern end of Thirlmere, which was built in 1640 on the site of an earlier chapel. No buildings or landscapes of Picturesque influence were constructed in Thirlmere and this may be one of the reasons it was selected to become Manchester's water supply.



FIGURE 2.c.10.15 View north across Leathes Water prior to construction of the dam



FIGURE 2.c.10.16 The pack horse bridge at Sosgill, St John's in the Vale, with the mountain of Blencathra in the distance

Although the extent of agricultural land has been reduced in the Thirlmere, it is still the location for the largest Herdwick farm in the Lake District at West Head farm. There are 22 farms with fell-going flocks in the Thirlmere Valley area. There are four registered Herdwick flocks and three registered Swaledale flocks. Upland grazing is provided on about 4,534 hectares of Registered Common Land – about 56 per cent of the total area and virtually all of the open fell. The Dockray and Matterdale Shepherds' Meet is held alternately at Dockray and Threlkeld Cricket Club on the first Thursday after the 22 November, every year.

The dam infrastructure itself is now considered to be of architectural and historical interest as it was the first English masonry gravity dam and one of only two arch dams in England. The straining well building on the east shore marks where the head of Wythburn Water once was; it is a mock castle-like tower with three wings and suggests that the new architecture was still constructed with earlier Picturesque qualities in mind. There are many other water company buildings in the valley, including houses and works buildings.

Industrial activity in Thirlmere also included mining and quarrying and numerous trials and small workings can be seen scattered throughout the valley today, including a copper mine of the Elizabethan period on the fellside of Brown Crag, the small but



FIGURE 2.c.10.17 Thirlmere dam under construction, c. 1890

spectacularly located lead mine below the summit of Helvellyn and the former copper mine at Birkside Gill. There are numerous small quarries dating from the period of dam construction together with larger examples including the slate quarries at Bell Crag on Armboth fell and the extensive microgranite quarries at Bramcrag, Hilltop and Threlkeld on the east side of St John's in the Vale.

The catchment land and reservoir infrastructure is now owned and operated by United Utilities who own 4,700 hectares of land in the Thirlmere Valley. The reservoir supplies about 11 per cent of the water demand of the North West of England. Over the past ten

years improvements have been made to the planting regime to enhance its appearance and wildlife value and to open up views. Much of this has been a result of late 20th century battles over the interpretation and implementation of the forestry aspects of the 1879 Act authorising the reservoir. Access and Common Land issues have continued to be a source of disagreement but recreational use of the Thirlmere Estate has been more actively encouraged by United Utilities including boating on the reservoir.

Evidence of the earliest settlement has largely been removed by the flooding of the most fertile land in the valley bottom. Surviving archaeological sites are restricted to higher ground in the periphery of the valley area. The reputed burial place of King Dunmail (died 945), the last monarch of the early medieval kingdom of Cumbria, sits on the summit of Dunmail Raise (although it may in fact be a Bronze Age cairn). One of the best known sites in the Lake District is Castlerigg stone circle, probably late Neolithic in date (about 3,200 BC) and set within a dramatic amphitheatre formed by Helvellyn, Skiddaw, Grasmooor and Blencathra. Evidence for late prehistoric agriculture in the form of clearance cairns and an enclosed settlement at Threlkeld Knotts has also survived. There are no Roman remains in the valley. But there are six shielings near Clough Fold which are scheduled as ancient monuments and are likely to represent early medieval or medieval transhumant practices.

The best agricultural land, now underwater, would have been colonised by the first medieval farmers. Medieval strip fields can still be found near Armboth and Wythburn. At the north end of the valley, there are examples of open field strip fields on the lower-lying land along the River Glenderamackin. Between Guardhouse and Doddick adjacent to the present day Threlkeld Hall are some strips which appear to represent a former common field. The name Guardhouse contains the garth prefix indicating the presence of a ring garth of some kind. Threlkeld was first referred to as 'Trellekell' in the Pipe Rolls of 1197 and the field pattern may therefore have its origins in the 12th century. To the west, at Townfield and Burns Farm the common fields of Threlkeld and Wescoe extend into the valley area.



FIGURE 2.c.10.18 The Neolithic stone circle at Castlerigg (c. 4,000-2,000 BC)

The uplands would have been colonised at a later date, perhaps by making earlier shieling settlements permanent. Fornside, Naddle and Shoulthwaite first appear in historical source material in the late 13th to early 14th centuries. The small settlements of Lowthwaite, Wanthwaite, Legburthwaite and Smaithwaite seem to have developed as colonies at a similar time.

A second period of expansion probably included the isolated farms down the east side of the valley to Thirlspot – Stanah, Stybeck, Brotto and Fisher Place. These settlements seem to have had minimal land available on the valley floor for arable cultivation, and probably relied on the common pasture at High Rigg, Low Rigg and St John’s Common to provide a surplus of livestock and animal produce for market in Keswick.

There is little evidence of monastic influence in this valley, but there is some evidence for medieval deer parks based on field names. For example, the area south of Armbboth was referred to as ‘Deergarth’ on some historic maps. Another area called High Park on the east side, close to Dale Head, might have also been a medieval deer park, but it equally may have been a product of 16th century reorganisation. The enclosure wall for the Laithes Park / High Park deer park survives in part on the east side of Thirlmere. Unlike in other valleys the amount of intaking in the 16th and 17th centuries appears to have been relatively modest.

Although Thirlmere was referred to in the 18th century guidebooks by West and Gilpin, it does not appear to have been a hugely popular tourist attraction; instead it provided a through route to other destinations. The valley did, however, capture the imagination of the Romantic poets. The Wordsworths and Coleridge often met in the valley while travelling between their respective homes in Grasmere and Keswick and their meeting point was marked by the ‘Rock Of Names’, upon which were carved the initials of Coleridge, William Wordsworth, his brother John and sister Dorothy, and Mary and Sarah Hutchinson. The original rock was blasted during construction of the reservoir, but pieces of it were rescued by Canon Rawnsley; they are now located outside the Wordsworth Museum in Grasmere.

A number of surviving buildings and features in the valley have direct associations with the poets and their writings. For example, Wythburn Church was described by Wordsworth in the ‘The Waggoner’ as “Wytheburn’s modest House of prayer, As lowly as the lowliest dwelling”. The church contains some bronze work by the Keswick School

of Industrial Arts, which flourished from 1884 for one hundred years, and outside is a stone erected by Canon Rawnsley commemorating two walks inspired by the poet Matthew Arnold. On the opposite side of the road are the ruins of the Nag's Head Inn, where the poet John Keats slept in June 1818, and to the north the site of the Cherry Tree Inn where Wordsworth stayed with Scott, Lockhart and Wilson in 1823 and also described in his 'The Waggoner'. Wordsworth mentioned Great How in 'Rural Architecture' (1800), which tells the tale of three local schoolboys who climbed to the top of the crag. Wordsworth was much associated with Helvellyn. One of the great portraits of the poet, by Benjamin Robert Haydon, poses him against a backdrop of the mountain, and was painted to commemorate a sonnet that Wordsworth had written to Haydon while climbing Helvellyn in 1840. Helvellyn was also indirectly the inspiration for Walter Scott's poem 'The Bridal of Triermaine' (1805). Perhaps the finest description of Thirlmere was provided by Coleridge in his notebook entry for 23 October 1803:

"O Thirlmere! – let me some how or other celebrate the world in thy mirror. – Conceive all possible varieties of Form, Fields, & Trees, and naked or ferny Craggs – ravines, behaired with Birches – Cottages, smoking chimneys, dazzling wet places of small rock-precipices – dazzling castle windows in the reflection – all these, within a divine outline in a mirror of 3 miles distinct vision!"

Today, walkers and climbers are attracted to Helvellyn, the third highest mountain in England. Building on this popularity, the Youth Hostel Association operated a hostel in Thirlmere at Legburthwaite from 1970 to 2001. Since then a new hostel has been built on the site and is operated by a private business.

QUALITIES

The Thirlmere Valley has important attributes for the Outstanding Universal Value themes of agro-pastoral farming and aesthetic inspiration, but it is for the theme of the early conservation movement that the Valley stands out.

Although extensive areas of inbye land in the valley were lost beneath the reservoir, Thirlmere is still the location for 22 farms with fell-going flocks including West Head, one of the important Herdwick farms in the Lake District. Almost all of the extensive fell grazing is Common Land and there are a number of important historic farm houses dating from the 17th century.

Significant evidence for early land use includes the Neolithic stone circle of Castlerigg (perhaps the best known archaeological site in the Lake District). A Roman marching camp has recently been discovered near the Castlerigg stone circle and the remains of a native settlement of this period can be seen at Threlkeld Knotts. Early medieval sites include a small hillfort at Shoulthwaite and the foundations of shieling huts below Clough Head. The famous cairn on the top of Dunmail Raise is reputed to be the burial place of King Dunmail, the last monarch of the early medieval kingdom of Cumbria.

In the 18th century Thirlmere attracted some attention from early visitors, particularly as it was on the route from Grasmere to Keswick. Descriptions of its views were included in Thomas West's guidebook but its scenery did not attract any major villa buildings or landscaping. However, Thirlmere had a greater significance to Romantic writers and artists and was the location for the 'Rock of Names' which marked a customary meeting point for the Wordsworths and Samuel Taylor Coleridge between their respective homes in Grasmere and Keswick. Thirlmere was also the inspiration for William Wordsworth's poem 'The Waggoner' and Walter Scott's poem 'The Bridal of Triermain'.

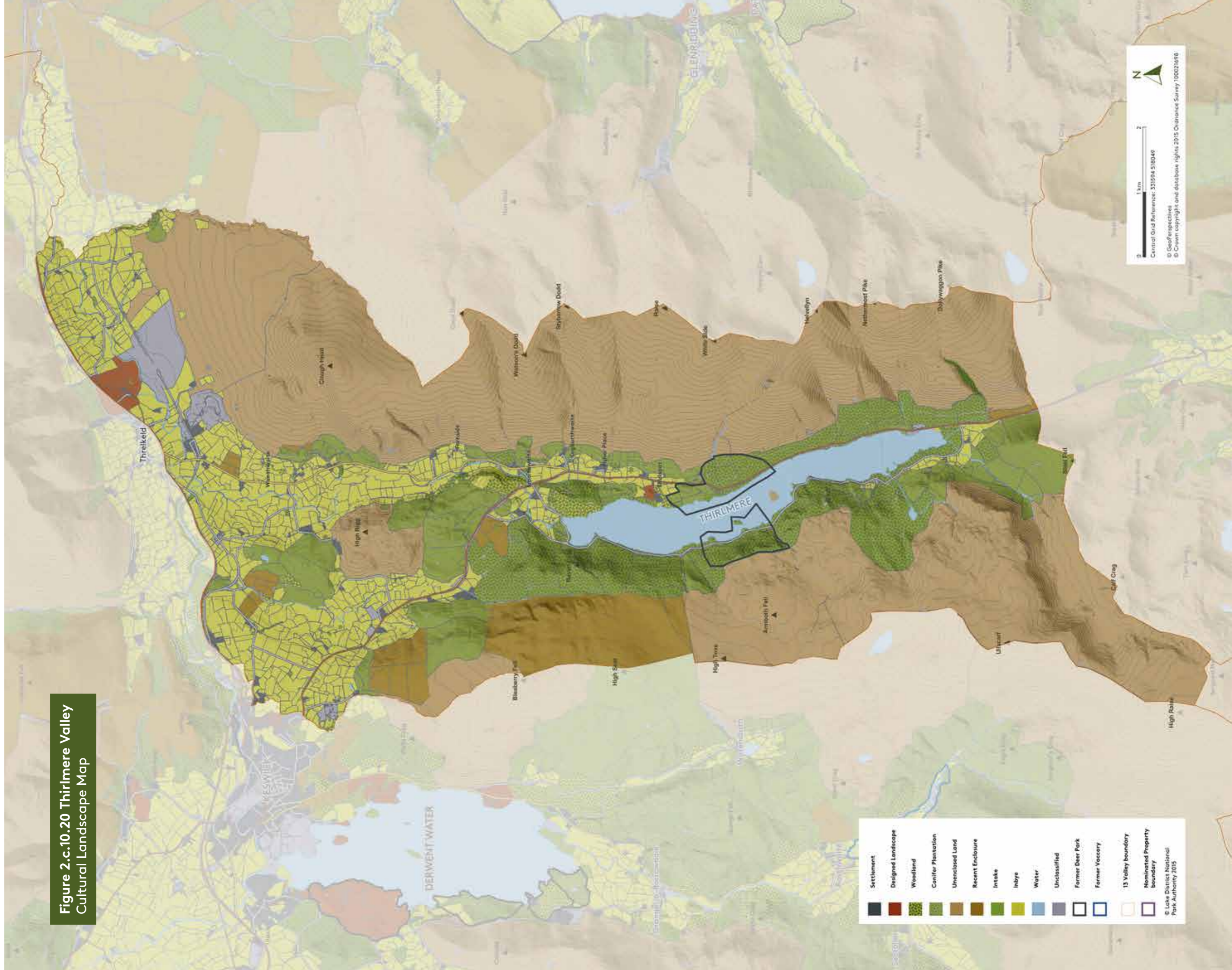
The Thirlmere Valley is one of the most significant locations in the development of the early conservation movement in the Lake District. Despite the success of the Manchester Corporation in achieving the construction of the dam and reservoir in the valley, the protest against this was a seminal event in the history of landscape conservation. The protest inspired further, successful campaigns in the Lake District against proposals which threatened the beauty of its landscape, and the key protagonists, all followers of John Ruskin, were inspired to found the National Trust in order to purchase land for its protection. The National Trust owns very little land in the valley (149 hectares of land in the valley, of which 101 hectares is inalienable), but the Thirlmere Reservoir stands as testament to the fundamental struggles of the emergent conservation movement in the Lake District.

While Thirlmere displays substantial attributes attesting to the themes of Outstanding Universal Value of agro-pastoral farming and aesthetic inspiration, the most important theme associated with this part of the English Lake District is the development of the early conservation movement.



FIGURE 2.c.10.19 The view of Blencathra from Tewet Tarn

Figure 2.c.10.20 Thirlmere Valley Cultural Landscape Map



- Settlement
 - Designed Landscape
 - Woodland
 - Conifer Plantation
 - Unenclosed Land
 - Recent Enclosure
 - Intake
 - Inbye
 - Water
 - Unclassified
 - Former Deer Park
 - Former Vockery
 - - - 13 Valley boundary
 - ▬ Nominated Property boundary
- © Lake District National Park Authority 2015

0 1 km 2
 Central Grid Reference: 331594 518048
 © Geo Perspectives
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FIGURE 2.c.10.21 The contribution of the Thirlmere Valley to the cultural landscape themes identified

















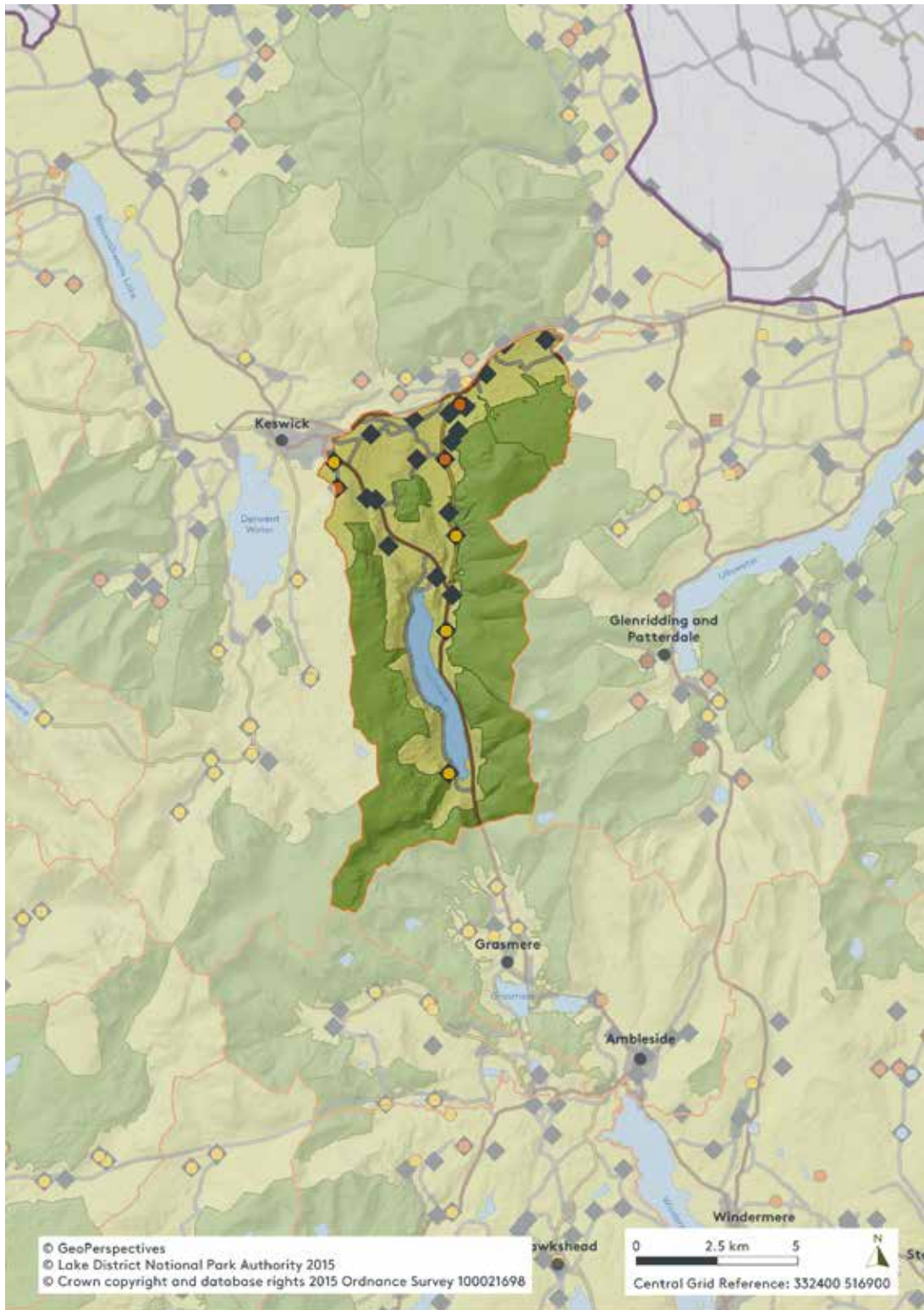
THIRLMERE		
THEME	COMPONENTS OF ATTRIBUTES	SIGNIFICANCE
Continuity of traditional agro-pastoralism and local industry in a spectacular mountain landscape	Extraordinary beauty and harmony	
	Evidence of pre-medieval settlement and agriculture	
	Distinctive early field system	
	Medieval buildings (e.g. churches, pele towers and early farmhouses)	
	16th/17th century farmhouses	
	Herdwick flocks	
	Rough Fell flocks	None
	Swaledale flocks	
	Common land	
	Shepherds' meets/shows and traditional sports	None
	Woodland industries	None
	Mining/Quarrying	
	Water-powered industry	None
	Market towns	None
Discovery and appreciation of a rich cultural landscape	Viewing stations	None
	Villas	None
	Designed landscape	
	Early tourist infrastructure	None
	Residences and burial places of significant writers and poets	None
	Key literary associations with landscape	
	Key artistic associations with landscape	
	Key associations with climbing and the outdoor movement	None
	Opportunities for quiet enjoyment and spiritual refreshment	
Development of a model for protecting cultural landscape	Conservation movement	
	National Trust ownership (inalienable land)	
	National Trust covenanted land	None
	Other Protective Trusts and ownership including National Park Authority	

FIGURE 2.c.10.22 Shepherds' flocks and native sheep breeds in the Thirlmere Valley



- Nominated Property boundary
 - Valley boundary
 - Registered Common Land
 - ◆ Fell-going Flocks
- Flocks registered with Breed Associations:
- Herdwick
 - Rough Fell
 - Swaledale
 - Multiple Breeds

Registered Common Land © Natural England 2015. Attribute data for Fell-going flocks: Lakeland Shepherds' Guide 2005.
 Attribute data for flocks: Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association 2014, Rough Fell and Swaledale Sheep Breeders' Associations 2013.



FIGURE 2. c. 3. 23 View of the Thirlmere dam from Raven Crag