



# CONISTON

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Summary Description

## 2.c.3 THE CONISTON VALLEY

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“Looking towards the mountains, the lake spreads itself into a noble expanse of transparent water and bursts into a bay on each side, bordered with verdant meadows...”

Thomas West, ‘Guide to the Lakes’ (1778)

### DESCRIPTION AND DEVELOPMENT

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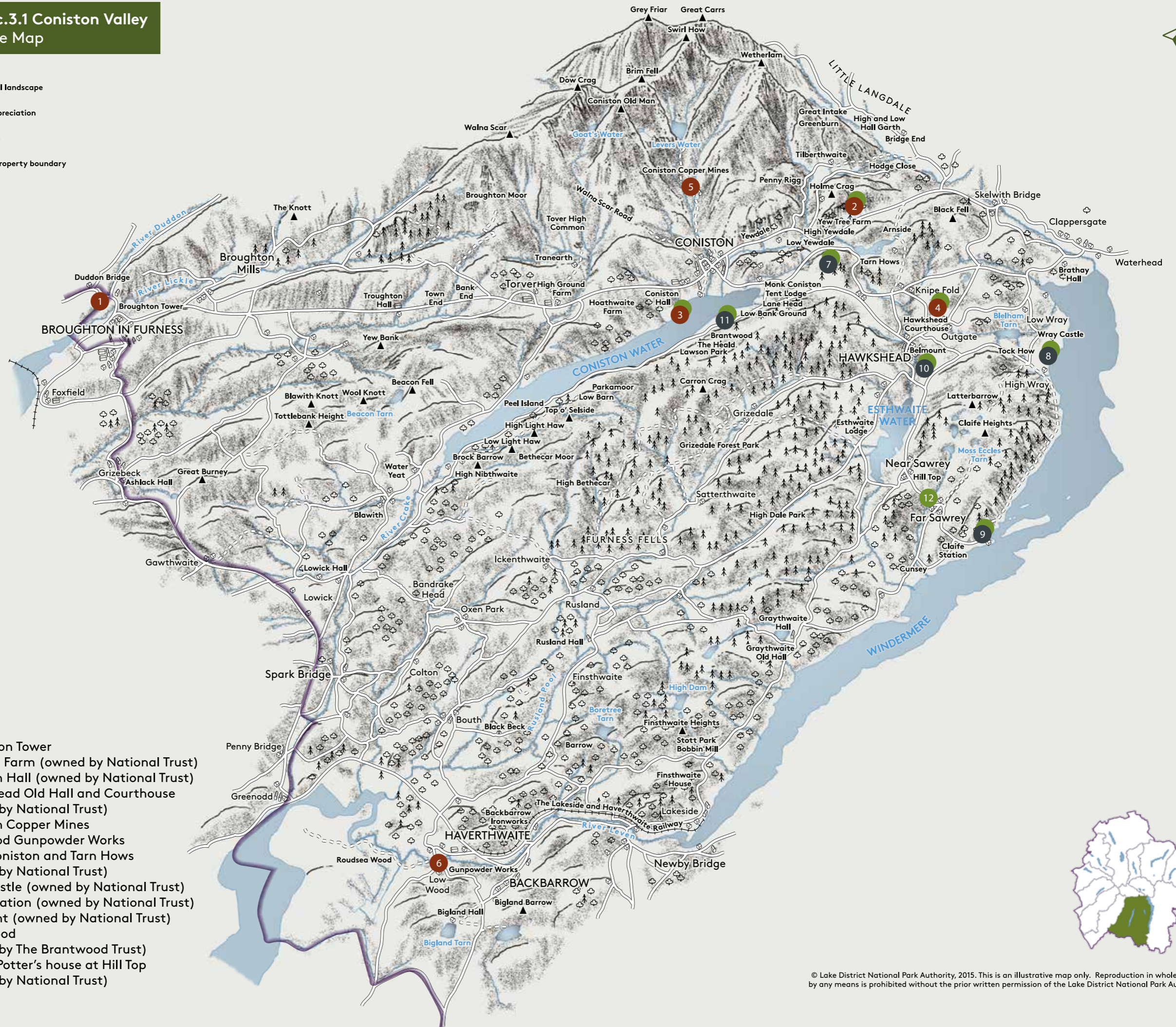
The Coniston Valley runs south from the valleys of Langdale and Grasmere, Rydal and Ambleside with the Duddon Valley to its west and Windermere to the east. The valley is dominated by high, rugged fells including the Coniston Old Man and Wetherlam in the west, the linear, glacial lake, Coniston Water, running north south for the greater part of the length of the valley, and extensive woodlands and forestry plantations on the low fells east of the lake which form one of the most densely wooded areas in England.

The legacy of extensive mining and quarrying on the fellsides, including a number of quarries still producing slate today, pastoral farming on lower ground, extensive woodlands supporting traditional woodland industries, intensive silviculture centred on Grizedale, and the large, bustling Victorian village of Coniston combine to create a strong sense of a working landscape. The rugged, wild and remote natural beauty of the high fells is not diminished by past industries; but the combination of a richly patterned agricultural landscape, the large lake, the patchwork of deciduous woodlands and forests and occasional parkland and designed landscape creates stunning scenery.

Although there is evidence of human settlement in the valley from the Neolithic period 4,000 years ago, the present day agricultural landscape has its origins in medieval times and is characterised by single ancient farms with their small irregular fields around the head of the lake, around the village of Coniston and along the adjoining Woodland Valley to the south west. Unlike the valleys that lie deeper in the heart of the Lake District fells, Coniston does not appear to have had a stone-walled ring garth in the medieval period, separating a common field in the valley bottom land from the grazed fellsides. However, the remains of a former common or ‘town’ field which performed the same function as communally farmed, arable fields, can be identified on the lake shore in the area between Coniston and Coniston Hall. The ‘town field’ was probably established by the end of the 13th century, together with a deer park around Coniston Hall, the course of which can still be traced on the ground.

**Figure 2.c.3.1 Coniston Valley Illustrative Map**

- Agro-pastoral landscape
- Aesthetic appreciation
- Conservation
- Nominated Property boundary



1. Broughton Tower
2. Yew Tree Farm (owned by National Trust)
3. Coniston Hall (owned by National Trust)
4. Hawkshead Old Hall and Courthouse (owned by National Trust)
5. Coniston Copper Mines
6. Low Wood Gunpowder Works
7. Monk Coniston and Tarn Hows (owned by National Trust)
8. Wray Castle (owned by National Trust)
9. Claife Station (owned by National Trust)
10. Belmont (owned by National Trust)
11. Brantwood (owned by The Brantwood Trust)
12. Beatrix Potter's house at Hill Top (owned by National Trust)

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



NO. 1 FIGURE 2.c.3.2 Broughton Tower (began as 14th century pele tower)



NO. 2 FIGURE 2.c.3.3 Yew Tree Farm (owned by National Trust)



NO. 3 FIGURE 2.c.3.4 Coniston Hall (owned by National Trust)



NO. 4 FIGURE 2.c.3.5 Hawkshead Old Hall and Courthouse (owned by National Trust)



NO. 5 FIGURE 2.c.3.6 Coniston Copper Mines



NO. 6 FIGURE 2.c.3.7 Low Wood Gunpowder Works



NO. 7 FIGURE 2.c.3.8 Monk Coniston and Tarn Hows (owned by National Trust)



NO. 8 FIGURE 2.c.3.9 Wray Castle (owned by National Trust)



NO. 10 FIGURE 2.c.3.11 Belmont (villa owned by National Trust)



NO. 9 FIGURE 2.c.3.10 Claife Station (owned by National Trust)



NO. 11 FIGURE 2.c.3.12 Brantwood (John Ruskin's residence, owned by The Brantwood Trust)



NO. 12 FIGURE 2.c.3.13 Beatrix Potter's house at Hill Top (owned by National Trust)



**FIGURE 2.c.3.14** The view of Coniston Water and Coniston village from John Ruskin's home at Brantwood. The Gondola can be seen on the lake.



**FIGURE 2.c.3.15** Coniston Hall

Early settlement in this valley area is mainly distinguished by monastic occupation of the Furness Fells from the 12th century, although there were also a small number of lay manors at Broughton, Torver and Coniston with 12th century or earlier origins. Much of the inbye land here seems to have been the result of manorial enclosure in the 12th and 13th century; with isolated farmsteads and small hamlets planted within recently cleared woodland. The

monks had numerous interests including iron mining in Furness that was documented by at least 1292 (Collingwood 1902). The use of charcoal for iron smelting, however, meant that the extent of surrounding woodland was severely reduced, especially as the tenants of the abbot had the right to take timber for house building and wood sufficient for their daily needs. The medieval landscape west of Coniston was quite different however. The Abbey utilised the previously uncultivated uplands by establishing a number of remote farms to develop sheep farming and from it a trade in wool; it also set up a number of granges, the closest of which was in Hawkshead.

The majority of available land on the valley bottom is likely to have been enclosed by tenant farmers prior to the surrender of Furness Abbey in 1537, with the majority of better land enclosed by the 14th or early 15th century. The disasters of the 14th century had left a reduced population who were able to expand outwards to create larger

holdings on the enclosed land. Any new enclosure during the late 15th and early 16th centuries is likely to have been piecemeal and small scale.

The 16th century was a period of considerable change in agricultural practices and building form brought about by changing tenurial relationships. Furness Abbey appears to have attempted to restrict the growth in illegal enclosure in the early years of the 16th century, but the Dissolution of the Monasteries freed up most of the eastern half of the valley area for development by private individuals letting their new estates as a mixture of rich and marginal farmland. Division of the former monastic parkland as intakes associated with isolated farms and hamlets is most marked at Claife Heights. Iron smelting using charcoal produced from the local woodland continued after the Dissolution and the resulting destruction of woodland in Furness for fuel was so severe that it led to a temporary ban on the use of bloomeries in 1567.

Many farms were sub-divided in the 16th century suggesting land shortage, possibly as a result of earlier restrictions imposed by Furness Abbey before Dissolution, and as a result there was considerable intaking of marginal lands or land located towards the edge of the commons. From the late 18th century onwards small lowland farms were reorganised in the Hawkshead and Claife area resulting in fewer larger farms. The amalgamation of farm holdings quickened after 1800, partly as a response to the enclosure of Claife Commons and the struggle for farms to remain economical, but also as a result of the declining rural population as more people drifted towards the growing industrial towns of Millom and Barrow.

The long tradition of sheep farming continues in Coniston valley today. There are 77 farms with fell-going flocks. There are 14 Herdwick flocks, five Swaledale flocks and four Rough Fell flocks registered with the relevant Sheep Breeders' Associations. There are four National Trust landlord flocks in Coniston valley area at Tilberthwaite, High Yewdale, Coniston Hall and Hoathwaite.



FIGURE 2.c.3.16 Herdwick sheep at Tilberthwaite

About 15 percent of the total area and most of the open fell is Registered Common Land. Herdwick sales of ewes and rams occur twice a year at Broughton-in-Furness and the Walna Scar Shepherds' Meets also take place twice a year at the Blacksmiths Arms in Broughton Mills, the Newfield Hotel in Seathwaite or Church House in Torver. The Lakeland Country Fair takes place every year at Torver in August, the Coniston Country Fair is held at Coniston Hall every July and the Hawkshead Show is held in August.

The farm buildings and walls in the Coniston Valley present the same familiar solid stone character as other valleys, making use of the local Silurian slate and green slate for roofing material. Shard fences are common in this area, for example around Broughton Mills. Many farm buildings have their origins in the 17th century, occasionally even the 16th century and some sit on the sites of earlier medieval farms.

From the 17th industries based on woodland products again become significant due to more intensive and sustainable woodland management, including coppicing, leading to an expansion of woodland. In addition to iron smelting there were water-powered industries, copper mining, and quarrying and many have left their mark on the landscape or survive as upstanding buildings. Coniston Copper Mine, a large scheduled monument, has extensive remains of extraction and processing dating from the 16th to the early 20th centuries. Slate quarrying was also a major industry and a small number of slate quarries are still working in the Valley. The River Leven, at the southern end of the Coniston Valley, provided power for blast furnaces, a gunpowder works and various other water-powered industries between the 17th and 20th centuries.



FIGURE 2.c.3.17 Coniston village beneath Coniston Old Man

There are a number of rich historical and architectural settlements and buildings in addition to the vernacular farm built heritage. The key settlements are Coniston, Hawkshead and Broughton-in-Furness along with Near and Far Sawrey. The principal settlement in the main valley is the village of Coniston, with a smaller hamlet at Torver.

Further hamlets are found along the course of the River Crake, including High Nibthwaite, Blawith, Water Yeat, Spark Bridge, Lowick, Greenodd and Penny Bridge. Many of these settlements include stone-built cottages, often in terraces, built to house local industrial workers.

Coniston was not one of the most important destinations for early visitors in search of the Picturesque due to the lack of easy access in the 18th century, but it was visited by the guidebook writer Thomas West, who identified a series of viewing stations around Coniston Water (See Section 2.b). These still exist, and are mostly publicly accessible,

and the views from them largely survive. The Station at Claife, the only viewing station on which a major structure was erected, is just within the eastern boundary of the Valley, on the shore of Windermere. The Coniston landscape was the subject of major modifications designed to increase its Picturesque beauty. One of the most popular visitor destinations today is Tarn Hows, just to the north of Coniston Water, a spectacularly beautiful lake created by damming three smaller natural tarns, and surrounded by ornamental tree planting. A number of villas, including Brantwood, later the home of John Ruskin, were constructed or developed around Coniston Water and on the Western shore of Windermere.



FIGURE 2.c.3.18 The village of Near Sawrey

Coniston was visited by many of the Romantic poets and artists and there is a wealth of poetic description of buildings and features that survive in the landscape today. It features in Wordsworth's 'The Prelude' and J. M. W. Turner is said to have stayed here in 1797, sketching in preparation for his first Royal Academy exhibit, 'Morning Among the Coniston Fells', now one of the best known paintings of the Lake District. Later literary

associations with Coniston also include the series of children's books by Arthur Ransome (1884–1967) beginning with 'Swallows and Amazons' (published in 1929). The Near Sawrey and Hawkshead area is the core area for Beatrix Potter. Many settings for her books are recognisably in these settlements and the surrounding countryside. The Ruskin Museum was founded as Coniston's permanent memorial to its most famous resident, John Ruskin, who died in 1900. It has extensive displays on the history of Coniston, the geology, archaeology, mining of the area and local crafts, as well as Ruskin's life and activities. The Coniston valley area continues to inspire artistic activity today, one of the most well-known being the Grizedale Arts organisation in Grizedale Forest, established in the late 1970s. Recreation contributes much to the character of the valley with the Coniston fells being popular with walkers and climbers.

Overall Coniston has a strong sense of being a working landscape while retaining a natural beauty as intense as any part of the Lake District. There is designed landscape in parts (such as Monk Coniston) but not on the same scale as some other parts of the region and the slightly untamed nature of the landscape is always apparent. Retaining these special qualities has been challenging and the valley has a number of heritage assets with a connection to the early conservation movement. Wray Castle was a key location for the meeting of significant characters in the Lake District's conservation story. Beatrix Potter spent a summer holiday at Wray Castle when she was sixteen in 1882 and met Rawnsley, then the vicar of Wray Church, which was to lead to a life-long friendship and the founding of the National Trust.

The National Trust acquired Beatrix Potter's estate, including the larger properties of Parkmoor, Coniston Hall Estate and many smaller properties, and this valley is thus the most important in the Lake District for the legacy of Beatrix Potter's land purchases for

conservation purposes. The Lake District National Park Authority has large ownership of Common Land in the Coniston valley, and entered into a 99 year lease of the Torver Commons from the Crown Estates in 1966 in order to provide public access and recreation. They also purchased Blawith Common order to provide a public access area and to control recreational use there.

Coniston has featured in conservation battles over access and recreational use of lakes and tracks since the 1950s. These battles have focussed on the balance between recreation and quiet enjoyment. Consequently the use of power boats and water skiing are now controlled on the lake and legal battles continue over the right to use motorised vehicles on former stock and quarry roads.



**FIGURE 2.c.3.19** Low Tilberthwaite Cottage. A small 17th Century farmhouse with spinning gallery. Purchased by Beatrix Potter and now owned by the National Trust.

## QUALITIES

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The landscape beauty of the Coniston Valley is based in large measure on the dominance of the agro-pastoral use of the landscape against the backdrop of relatively extensive woodland around the lake and high mountains to the west. The valley has good evidence for the development of the agro-pastoral system, with areas of the typical Lake District field pattern of inbye and intake, but also has areas of more open fields around Coniston, based on an early 'town field', probably dating from the 13th century, and around the village of Hawkshead. Agro-pastoral farming is still very important here, with a large number of fell-going flocks and a number of important Herdwick farms. There are many important early farm buildings including the Coniston Hall and Yew Tree Farm, with its iconic 'spinning gallery'. The small market town of Broughton-in-Furness is the location for the most important Herdwick market in the Lake District.

Evidence for early land use is extensive with numerous archaeological remains of prehistoric settlement, agriculture and ritual monuments. In the past Coniston was one of the most important valleys in the Lake District for industry, including mining and quarrying, iron smelting and woodland industries.



**FIGURE 2.c.3.20** Coniston Copper Mines

In addition to Broughton, other larger settlements in the Coniston Valley include Hawkshead, which gained a market charter in the 17th century and has a range of buildings dating from the medieval period to the 19th century. Coniston itself is also likely to have early origins but its character displays the influence of the local industries of mining and quarrying.

The Coniston Valley is rich in attributes relating to the theme of aesthetic inspiration. It was not one of the most important destinations for early visitors in search of the Picturesque due to the lack of easy access in the 18th century, but it was visited by the guidebook writer Thomas West, who identified viewing

stations around Coniston Water. However, the Coniston landscape was the subject of major modifications designed to increase its Picturesque beauty, such as the damming of Tarn Hows. A number of villas were constructed or developed around Coniston Water and on the western shore of Windermere.

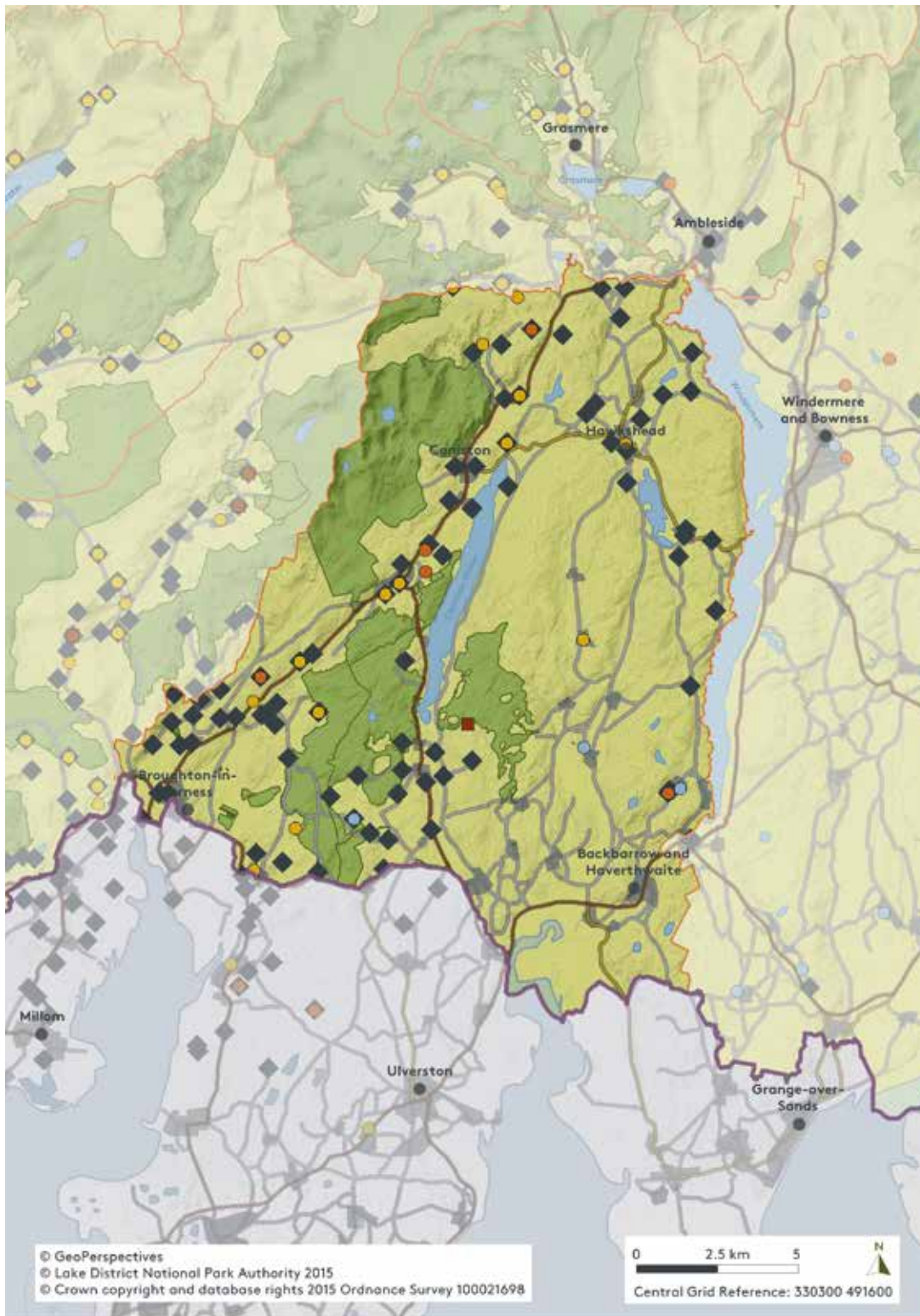
In later periods the Coniston Valley came to have much greater prominence as a source of artistic inspiration. William Wordsworth was a pupil at the grammar school in Hawkshead and his recollections of the valley and its residents feature strongly in important poems including 'The Prelude'. J. M. W. Turner created one of his key oil paintings here ('Morning among the Coniston Fells') and in the later 19th century John Ruskin took up residence at Brantwood. Coniston was also the inspiration for much of the landscape which featured in the famous *Swallows and Amazons* children's adventure stories of Arthur Ransome.

The Coniston Valley came to have a very high significance for conservation in the early 20th century because Beatrix Potter, living at Near Sawrey, made extensive purchases of farms and estates in the area, including Monk Coniston and Tarn Hows, in order to protect them. These were eventually passed to the National Trust which now owns and manages large parts of the northern part of the valley (3,587 hectares of land in Coniston Valley in total) including key farms and farm buildings, villas and designed landscapes. The Coniston Valley thus displays a full repertoire of attributes across the three intertwined themes of Outstanding Universal Value.

FIGURE 2.c.3.21 The contribution of the Coniston Valley to the cultural landscape themes identified

CONISTON		
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	
	Swaledale flocks	
	Common land	
	Shepherds' meets/shows and traditional sports	
	Woodland industries	
	Mining/Quarrying	
	Water-powered industry	
	Market towns	
Discovery and appreciation of a rich cultural landscape	Viewing stations	
	Villas	
	Designed landscape	
	Early tourist infrastructure	
	Residences and burial places of significant writers and poets	
	Key literary associations with landscape	
	Key artistic associations with landscape	
	Key associations with climbing and the outdoor movement	
	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	
	Other Protective Trusts and ownership including National Park Authority	

FIGURE 2.c.3.22 Shepherds' flocks and native sheep breeds in the Coniston Valley



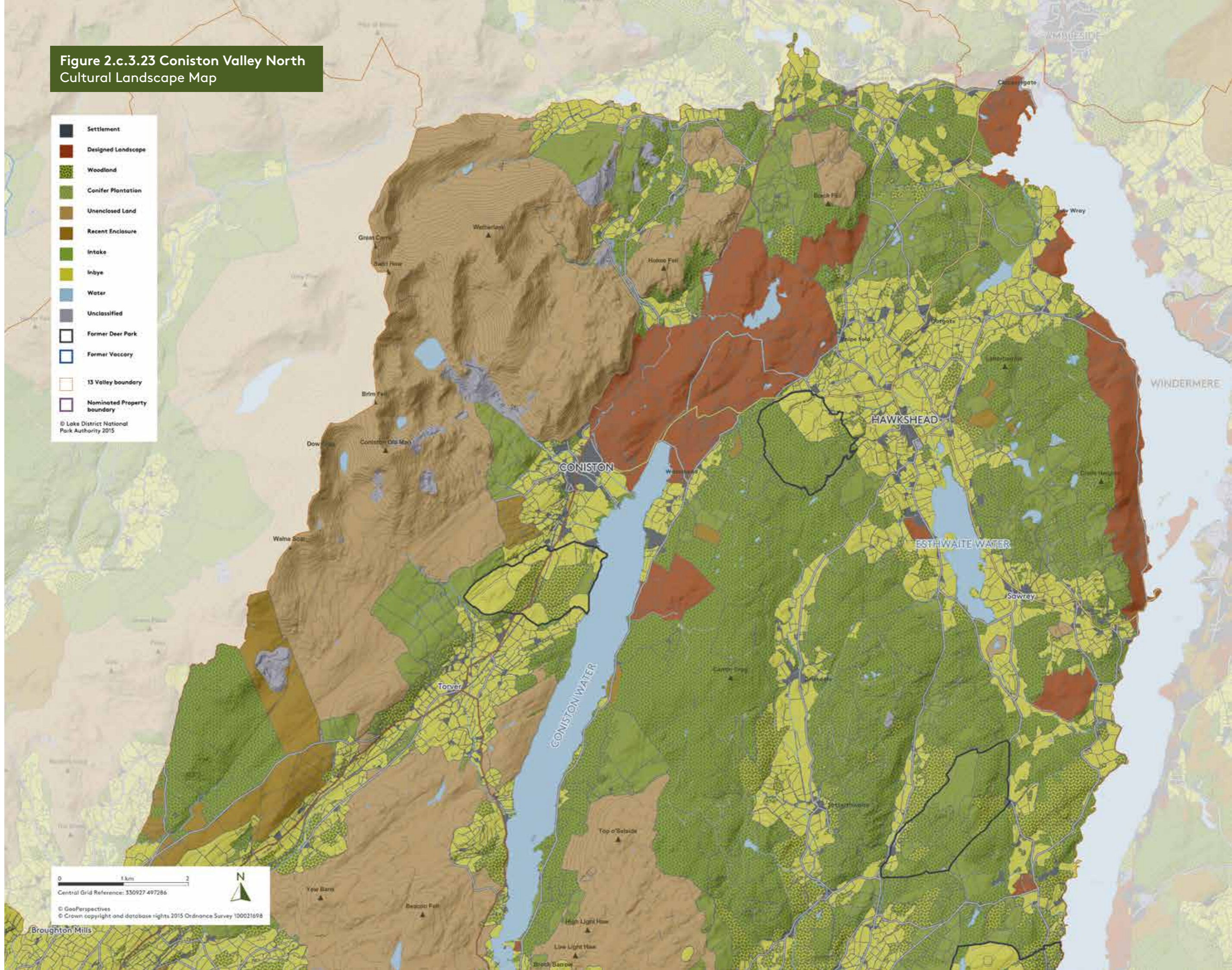
- Nominated Property boundary
  Valley boundary
  Registered Common Land
- Fell-going Flocks
- Flocks registered with Breed Associations:
  - Herdwick
  Rough Fell
  Swaledale
  Multiple Breeds

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 Coniston Valley North Cultural Landscape Map**

- Settlement
- Designed Landscape
- Woodland
- Conifer Plantation
- Unenclosed Land
- Recent Enclosure
- Intake
- Inbye
- Water
- Unclassified
- Former Deer Park
- Former Vaccary
- 13 Valley boundary
- Nominated Property boundary

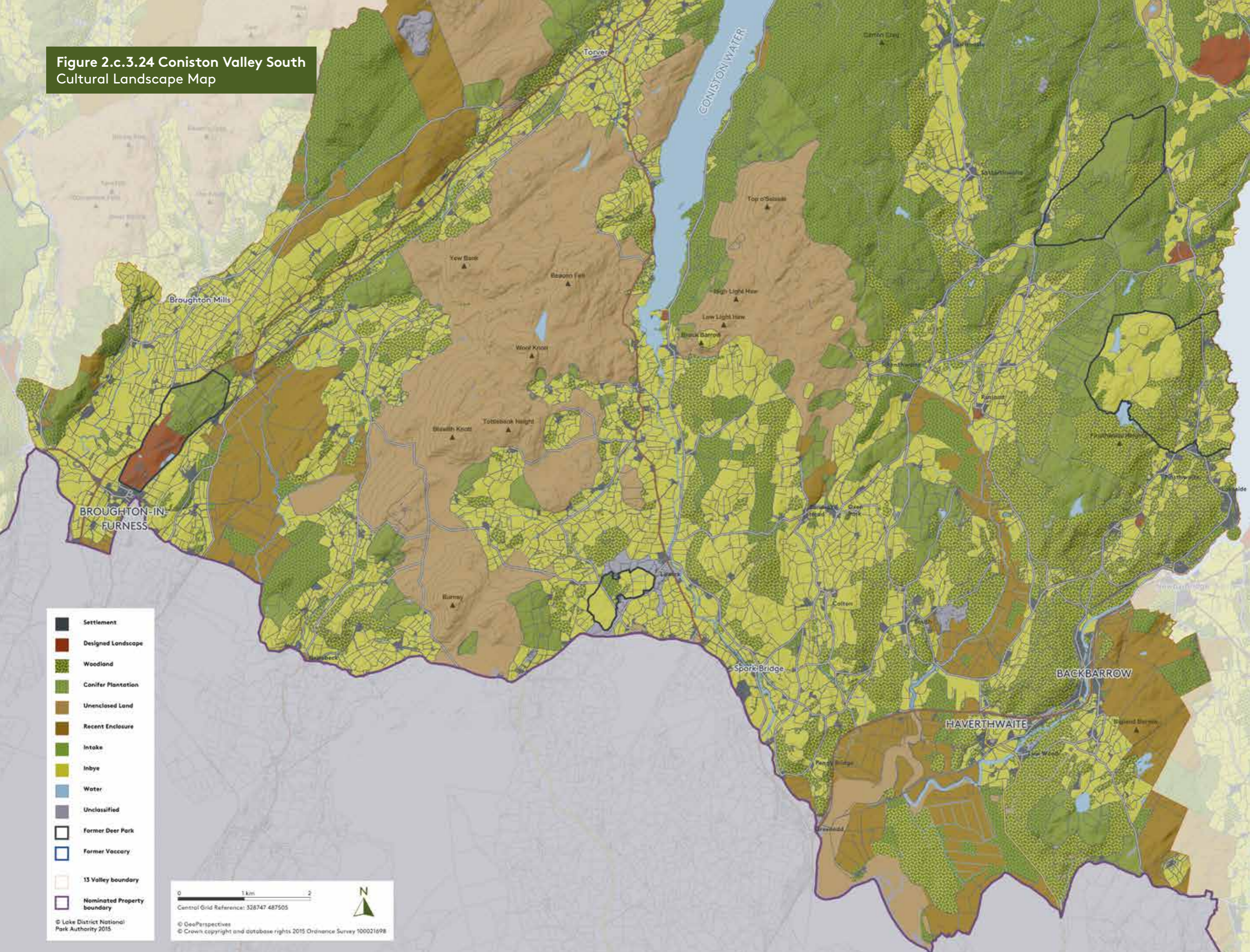
© Lake District National Park Authority 2015




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 Central Grid Reference: 330927 497286  
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Broughton Mills

Figure 2.c.3.24 Coniston Valley South Cultural Landscape Map



-  Settlement
-  Designed Landscape
-  Woodland
-  Conifer Plantation
-  Unenclosed Land
-  Recent Enclosure
-  Intake
-  Inbye
-  Water
-  Unclassified
-  Former Deer Park
-  Former Vaccary
-  13 Valley boundary
-  Nominated Property boundary

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Central Grid Reference: 528747 487505



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← FOLD OUT MAP



FIGURE 2.c.3.25 Wordsworth Street in Hawkshead (formerly known as Leather, Rag and Potty Street)