The Anglo-Scottish Western March: A landscape in transition

Caron Newman*

Abstract
The popular image of the borderlands, between England and Scotland in the Middle Ages, is one dominated by violence in a sparsely populated desolate landscape. The view of the Anglo-Scottish border as a largely unsettled area has influenced landscape management, particularly in the 20th century, with the creation of extensive areas of forestry plantation. Recent archaeological work in a small part of the border, in the modern English county of Cumbria, is beginning to reveal another perspective. Using a 1603 survey in conjunction with archaeological landscape survey, the late medieval landscape can be reconstructed, revealing a denser settlement pattern of farmsteads and hamlets, surrounded by large fields, many of which were cultivated. The process of settlement abandonment and shrinkage was just beginning in the early 17th century, but the main period of desertion seems to be linked to after the pacification of the borderlands, when agricultural improvement and landscape-scale reorganisation would have been more achievable. The survey shows that the popular image of the borderlands is overly simplistic, and that it is the result of complex processes that requires greater understanding of its historic development.

Keywords: Borderlands, settlement, abandonment, landscape survey, Anglo-Scottish, late medieval.

Résumé
La Region Frontalière Occidentale Anglo-Ecosaise: Un Paysage en Transition
L’image populaire de la région frontalière, entre l’Angleterre et l’Écosse pendant le Moyen Age, est celle d’une domination de la violence dans un paysage désolé et peu peuplé. La perception de la frontière anglo-écossaise comme une zone en grande partie non habitée a influencé la gestion du paysage, surtout pendant le 20e siècle, avec la création de vastes zones de plantations forestières. Des travaux archéologiques récemment réalisés dans une petite zone frontalière située dans le Cumbria, un comté anglais moderne, ont commencé à révéler une autre perspective. En utilisant un levé qui date du 1603 en parallèle avec une étude archéologique du paysage, il est possible de reconstruire le paysage du Moyen Age. Cette reconstruction révèle un modèle d’occupation plus dense, comprenant des fermes et des hameaux, entourés de grands champs dont beaucoup étaient cultivés. L’abandonet la rétraction des implantations a commencé au début du
Settlement change across Medieval Europe

Historically, the popular image of the lands between England and Scotland during the medieval period is overwhelmingly one of near-constant conflict. The frequent state of war between the countries was often conflated with raiding that arose from the 15th century. The reality was that the Anglo-Scottish border was not fixed until the middle of the 12th century, and relations between the two nations were mostly peaceful until the 13th century. For the remainder of the Middle Ages, the countries were frequently in a state of war, but they were not constantly fighting. Border raids became a problem only from the 15th century; often this resulted from feuding between local kindred groups and had nothing to do with nationality. By the end of the medieval period, conflict was common, even if only on a local scale and, as a result, the border in the Middle Ages is often depicted as a desolate landscape, dominated by families of marauding raiders, who burned and slaughtered their way across the borderlands (MacDonald Fraser 1971, 4; Moffatt 2007).

The modern landscape of the Anglo-Scottish border, consisting in England of the north-eastern corner of the county of Cumbria, and the northern and north-western parts of Northumberland, is mainly rolling upland or upland fringe, dominated by moorland and permanent grazing land. It is sparsely populated, with a settlement pattern of isolated farms and hamlets linked by minor roads and lanes (Natural England 2014). Historically, it was a region defined by river valleys, in Scotland Annandale, Eskdale, and Liddesdale and in England Tynedale, Redesdale, and Coquetdale. The region is distant from centres of power, agriculturally marginal, and has a low population density, hence it has been used for military training, large-scale coniferous forestry plantation, and water storage in the form of reservoirs. On the English side of the border, much of the region is contained within a national park. Land-management decisions by governmental and non-governmental agencies have been based on the apparent isolation and wild nature of the area. Such management decisions are a consequence of cultural preconceptions about borderlands, and a lack of understanding of past land use. One of the most obvious manifestations of this attitude was the planting of Kielder Forest in the 20th century, an extensive plantation that spans the county boundary between Cumbria and Northumberland. The forest is the largest planted coniferous woodland in northern Europe (Natural England 2014, 6), and has had a massive impact on the historic landscape of the borderlands. Despite ongoing afforestation and conservation policies to use the area as a carbon store through the restoration of blanket bog, there is little understanding of the nature and processes of historic land use. Relatively few archaeological sites have been recorded or investigated,
especially in Cumbria in comparison to the frontier zone of Hadrian’s Wall to the south, and previous landscape analyses suggests that in Cumbria at least there has been a complex process of landscape change since the end of the Middle Ages (Newman – Newman 2009, 46; Newman 2014, 191-194).

To better understand the medieval landscape and its subsequent transformation, with a view to informing future land-management decisions, in 2016 a small team of staff and students from Newcastle University carried out a rapid archaeological survey across a small upland fringe area of the Anglo-Scottish border, covering 11 km². The survey area lies within the historic English county of Cumberland, now part of the modern county of Cumbria, north of Hadrian’s Wall and to the east of the city of Carlisle (Fig. 1). In the medieval period it formed the Askerton lordship in the north-west part of the Barony of Gilsland. Existing archaeological and historical data were collated, and additional information was gathered from online satellite photography and walkover surveys, supplemented by documentary evidence. Sites were recorded in the field using a handheld GPS and the results plotted onto a Geographical Information System (GIS). The following paper reports the results of this single, small case study. The results can be set in a border-wide context, however, through comparison with other case studies from Northumberland and the Scottish side of the border (Dixon 2014; Peters 2016; RCAHMS 1994).
Historical background

Medieval Cumberland was dominated by large and powerful baronies, reflecting close royal and seigneurial control of land near to the Scottish border (Winchester 1987, 2-3). There were two major English baronies along the border itself, within the Western March, both established by the early 12th century (Fig. 1): Liddel Barony to the west (Winchester 1987, 16; Graham 1913), and the Barony of Gilsland to the south-east (Ferguson 1894, 160). The survey area is within Gilsland Barony. The dominance of such large and powerful baronies had a significant effect on the development of the landscape from the medieval period. The land-management strategies of powerful landholders were influenced by the environmental nature of the landholdings, including the presence of extensive upland moorland and lowland mosses. Land controlled directly by baronies tended to be either close to the baronial seat or, as along the border, in the less densely settled and extensive areas of upland (Winchester 1987, 19-20). North of Hadrian’s Wall, the nature of baronial control is a key to land use in the medieval period with the designation of large areas as forest or chases (Fig. 1). The special laws, for the promotion and protection of hunting by the seigniory classes, allowed the lords to tightly control the borderlands. Gilsland Barony contained three legal forests: Askerton North Moor, Bruthwaite, and Geltsdale. Askerton North Moor was almost wholly moorland with very little tree cover (Winchester 2004, 28-29). In addition to the forests, there were several large deer parks. The survey area includes the very large deer park of Askerton, which was in existence by 1285 (Armstrong et al 1950, 102). It remained in use as a deer park into the post-medieval period, and is still marked as High Park and Low Park on Ordnance Survey maps, though the remains of Askerton Park pale (Fig. 2). The park came into existence in the late 13th century (Boynton 2003). The earthen banks of former field boundaries are substantial, ranging between 3 m and 4 m wide, and the boundary to Askerton deer park, which is well-preserved along much of its length, measures up to 6 m wide, though in most places its internal ditch has been lost. Although some of these relict boundaries run for hundreds of metres, the field patterns are fragmentary and difficult to discern, and there are several phases of activity. Changes to field boundaries are probably best illustrated by the division between Gillealess Farm (probably Over Gillealess in the 1603 survey) and the deserted site of Nether Gillealess. The two lay on either side of the Askerton deer park boundary, with Nether Gillealess inside the park. The park pale is still visible as a substantial bank, but the boundary has been replaced several times (Fig. 4). A small earthen bank lies around 10 m inside the deer park boundary, perhaps marking the limits of the Nether Gillealess farmstead inside the park, with the gap between originally occupied by the internal park pale ditch. In the post-medieval period, the older boundaries seem to have been replaced by a drystone wall, which itself was replaced by a post-and-wire fence in the 20th century.

Areas of broad ridge-and-furrow earthworks indicate that the settlements practised arable cultivation, possibly organised as infield-outfield systems, which was common on poorer ground in Cumberland (Elliott 1959), and that

The archaeological evidence

Of the 9 farmsteads named in the 1603 survey that are within the survey area, only 4 survive today, with the deserted 5 all being within Askerton Park (Fig. 2). Settlement within the survey area that lies outside the park appears to have shrunk rather than been deserted completely: for example, the hamlets at Rinnion Hills and Greensburn (Fig. 2) now survive as individual farmsteads. Rinnion Hills in 1603 was a settlement with 6 tenements (Graham 1934, 5). The standing farmhouse appears to be of 18th-century date, but possibly occupies the location of 2 earlier tenements. In the small field to the south of the farmhouse, low earthworks may be the remains of 2 more tenements, but the most obvious evidence for settlement shrinkage lies to the east of the farmhouse, where substantial earth-fast stone foundations, some of which may be the remains of a tower, may relate to the other 2 tenements in the hamlet (Fig. 3). The surrounding field pattern is obscured by multiple phases of earthen boundaries, but with a clearly defined area of ridge and furrow to the south-east of the settlement. The ridge-and-furrow earthworks are on land slowly converting to moorland.

Evidence for the medieval field pattern can be seen in the many relict earthen boundaries within the survey area, with the field pattern appearing to observe and incorporate the remains of Askerton Park pale (Fig. 2). The park came into existence in the late 13th century (Boynton 2003). The earthen banks of former field boundaries are substantial, ranging between 3 m and 4 m wide, and the boundary to Askerton deer park, which is well-preserved along much of its length, measures up to 6 m wide, though in most places its internal ditch has been lost. Although some of these relict boundaries run for hundreds of metres, the field patterns are fragmentary and difficult to discern, and there are several phases of activity. Changes to field boundaries are probably best illustrated by the division between Gillealess Farm (probably Over Gillealess in the 1603 survey) and the deserted site of Nether Gillealess. The two lay on either side of the Askerton deer park boundary, with Nether Gillealess inside the park. The park pale is still visible as a substantial bank, but the boundary has been replaced several times (Fig. 4). A small earthen bank lies around 10 m inside the deer park boundary, perhaps marking the limits of the Nether Gillealess farmstead inside the park, with the gap between originally occupied by the internal park pale ditch. In the post-medieval period, the older boundaries seem to have been replaced by a drystone wall, which itself was replaced by a post-and-wire fence in the 20th century.

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Fig. 2: The medieval settlement pattern of the survey area. Today it is wholly dominated by individual farmsteads but, in 1603, there were a number of farmsteads that were subsequently deserted, and some of the surviving farmsteads were once hamlets of up to 6 tenements. The settlements recorded in 1603 almost certainly reflect the late medieval pattern. Associated with the settlements are several phases of relict field boundaries and areas of broad ridge and furrow, indicating that cultivation formed part of a mixed-farming system (© Caron Newman, map background: Crown Copyright/database right).
farming was based on more than stock rearing. Both the field boundaries and areas of ridge and furrow now lie within either moorland or unimproved pasture, at a height of between 150 m to 250 m above sea level in areas now considered unsuitable for cultivation (Fig. 2). Some of the best-preserved earthworks lie on the rough grassland slopes of the hill known as Tower Brae, at 250 m above sea level (Fig. 5). Here, relict field boundaries define an area of around 22 ha, and within them were separate fields enclosing broad ridge and furrow. At the southern end of this complex are the substantial earthwork remains of 3 structures, which have been interpreted as a tower house, a smaller building possibly a barn, and a sunken, keyhole-shaped structure thought to be a corn dryer. The earthwork remains of 2 other buildings lie about 100 m east across an area of ridge and furrow. From the description in the 1603 survey, the 2 sets of remains appear to have been 2 tenements called Unmanrawe (Graham 1934, 7), both of which are described as decayed or wasted and having lately been in the possession of Anthony Edward Armstrong. A map of the manor of Askerton, which accompanied the written survey, features Armstrong’s name along with the

Fig. 3: The stone-foundations of a substantial building at Rinnion Hills. In the background, behind the field wall, are the earthwork remains of another substantial structure. Today, Rinnion Hills has only a single farmstead, but in 1603, there were 6 tenements, of which these would been 2 (© Caron Newman).

Fig. 4: The field pattern within the survey area has undergone several changes, including realignment or replacement of field boundaries. Here, the park pale to Askerton deer park can be seen to the right of the drystone wall as a rush-covered low bank, with the earthen boundary to the farm known as Nether Gillalaes to the left. At some point, the ditch to the park pale was lost and it, along with the farm boundary, were replaced by the drystone wall. It, too, became redundant, and was replaced by a post-and-wire fence (© Caron Newman).
depiction of a tower (Description and platt of the Lordshipp of Askerton 1603, manuscript map). The use of the terms ‘wasted’ and ‘decayed’ suggests that the tenements had been occupied relatively recently, possibly during the tenancy of Armstrong.

**Dating the archaeological remains**

Two farmsteads consisting of single-celled buildings within defined enclosures were noted to the east of Over Gillalees and north of Low Spadeadam (marked as ‘unknown’ in Fig. 2), neither of which could be identified in the 1603 survey and may already have been abandoned. Unmanrawe had been deserted by 1603. The other settlement earthworks identified by field survey relate to steadings in existence in 1603 (Graham 1934). Rentals dated between 1652 and 1660 indicate that the 3 sites identified as being the steadings of Nether Gillalees, Mele Farm, and Redstead House had all been abandoned. Craghead or Cragthrop was still tenanted in 1652 (Hudleston 1958). Excluding the sites to the east of Over Gillalees and Unmanrawe, which were deserted before 1603, and Craghead which was deserted after 1652, all the other desertions and shrinkages dated to the early 17th century. The settlements’ origins are more difficult to pin point, but it seems likely that they are contemporary with the enclosure system into which they fit, and this seems to be at least of 13th-century date in its earlier phases. A late 13th-century origin for this settlement pattern corresponds with the establishment of hill-farming communities elsewhere in northern England (Winchester...
The steadings within the deer park suggest that farming was taking place within its boundaries. It has been observed that Askerton Park at 543 ha in extent had the character of an enclosed chase rather than a deer park (Neuman 2014, 254).

**Discussion**

What caused the settlement shrinkage and desertion within the study area, as noted in the archaeological remains and indicated in the documentary evidence? The area can be considered marginal for arable viability, and climatic deterioration from the mid-14th century may have led to abandonment. At Alnhamsheles, Northumberland, the nucleated settlement there may have come to an end in the 16th century for these reasons (Dixon 2014) and there are other examples from Northumberland. The steadings to the east of Over Gillalees may have been victims to similar pressures. More widely, however, a harsh environment did not prevent population growth and settlement expansion in the northern English uplands in the later medieval period, culminating in overexploitation of resources that placed settlements at risk ‘in the subsistence crises of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century’ (Winchester 2000, 16). It is possible that such stresses lay behind the failure of Unmanrawe seemingly around 1600. The Border uplands are considered distinctive, however. Here the turmoil of Border lawlessness is regarded as having restricted settlement before the 17th century, confining permanent settlement to the main river-valley sides with only shielings higher up the side valleys in areas like North Tynedale and Redesdale (Winchester 2000, 17). Certainly, this is the pattern observed in a survey undertaken at Deadwater at the northern end of North Tynedale, where permanent settlement of the higher lands seems not to have happened until the 18th century (Peters 2016). In the study area, however, at a lower elevation than the Deadwater part of North Tynedale, Border lawlessness does not appear to have restricted settlement before the later 16th century and was not responsible for the observed desertions.

The main period of settlement shrinkage and desertion postdates the pacification of the borderlands in the early 17th century. The pacification of the Border after the 1603 union of the monarchies of England and Scotland led to the removal of whole families considered to be troublemakers and facilitated the replacement of customary tenures with leasehold (Spence 1977). This latter outcome of the pacification enabled the replacement of subsistence agriculture with commercial cattle farming. The results of this appear to be observable in the mid-17th century Naworth accounts, where the steadings within Askerton Park, excluding Craghead, had been replaced by one leasehold holding known as the Parkes first mentioned in 1648 (Hudleston 1958, 7), presumably situated at the farmstead now known as Parkgate.

This survey of a small part of the borderland suggests that the sparsely populated moorland landscape seen today was not a product of medieval warfare and raiding, but evolved in the post-medieval period from a more-settled farming landscape. In the study area, today’s low-elevation moorland was once divided into steadings mostly belonging to the Armstrong clan. This settled landscape appears to have been established by the later 13th century and whilst there were some modifications over the subsequent centuries, it seems to have survived substantially intact until the early 17th century, when changes brought about resulting from the pacification of the Borders led to a reduction in the number of steadings. This survey also indicates that, whilst the nature of the archaeological remains comprising substantial earthwork boundary banks and evidence of stone-founded buildings is similar throughout the moors of the Anglo-Scottish border, the stories they tell are specific to their locations. At Southdean, for example, on the Scottish side of the border the remains found by survey were very similar—boundary banks, farmsteads, and towers—but the story of settlement expansion and contraction was different (RCAHMS 1994). There, a 13th-century settlement and agricultural pattern remained relatively stable until it was considerably altered through agricultural improvement in the 18th century (RCAHMS 1994, 10-14). This current survey, along with others undertaken since that at Southdean, have shown that its claim to uniqueness (RCAHMS 1994, 17) are not justified based on the character of the archaeological remains, but also show that the same interpretation cannot be applied wherever such remains survive.

To an extent, this survey, along with other landscape-scale surveys in Coquetdale and the College Valley in Northumberland (Shipley 2010), suggests that rural life, at least on the English side of the border, was not greatly different to contemporary upland farming elsewhere in northern England. The late medieval settlement and agricultural pattern was impacted from the 17th century by agricultural ‘improvement’ and to an extent by extractive industries. Even so, the distinctive nature of the Border society and the consequences of its pacification did in some areas, such as parts of the Barony of Gilspend, create divergence in the early 17th century, with a significant reduction in population and broadly the creation of the sparse farming settlement pattern visible today.

The present-day landscape between Hadrian’s Wall and the Scottish border with Cumbria appears to be one dominated by moorland, much of it recently forested. Its apparent empty character is of relatively recent creation and does not indicate a wilderness with a lack of cultural heritage. This heritage requires to be understood to inform land-management decision-making. As argued...
at the time of the Southdean survey, further historic landscape survey is required throughout the Anglo-Scottish border zone (RCAHMS 1994, 17). Such survey helps to define identity through a shared cultural heritage, and thus where historic landscapes extend across borders, shared borderland identities may be anticipated. Modern sociopolitical developments, such as the division in land-use and heritage policies between England and Scotland, can obscure historical patterns, as can land-management decisions made because areas are considered underused, peripheral, and liminal.

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