

CONISTON OLD MAN HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Historical Notes and Curiosities

Much has been written about the mountain, but mainly by visitors who have enjoyed walking in the area. Although these writers are very familiar with the routes of ascent on the mountain and views from the summit they often have little knowledge of the extensive history of the mountain and the interesting curiosities that surround it.

Long Moss

The narrow defile across the face of Coniston Old Man is known locally by a number of names including Long Moss or Lang Rake. It provides an easy high level route from the Coppermines Valley to Low Cove. Long Moss was used by quarrymen in the early 20th C to get from their digs in the Coppermines Valley to work at Cove Quarries. More recently the route has been adopted by climbers heading for a day's climbing on Dow Crag. It is also used by local farmers when gathering is taking place. *(Arthur Wilson, Roy Cooksey)*

Flask Brow

On Flask Brow, on the southern slopes of the Old Man, a 'UFO' was allegedly seen and photographed by two young local walkers in 1955. The event, and the photographs taken, gained considerable publicity internationally. *(Ibby Brown)*

The 'Nail Road'

The steep and stony road leading up to Low Bank from the Windy Gap junction is known locally as the Nail Road. It was constructed to allow road vehicles easier access to the workings above, replacing a lower, earlier road to the quarries. The road was built, almost single-handedly, by O'Neill, a quarry employee who lodged at Rosley Thorns Farm, Torver and walked to work and back from Rosley Thorns each day. The name 'Nail' is a corruption of O'Neill. *(Leslie Grisedale)*

Sir Daniel le Fleming

Sir Daniel was Lord of the Manor of Coniston from 1663 to 1700. He was a well liked squire and frequently took exercise on the high-fells above Coniston. In one of his diaries he notes "*watched this day from Colt Crag the shower of shooting stars in the twilight and wondered what might be the reason for this strange sight*". Some years later he also writes "*took this day with me the miller Dixon onto ye mountain for exercise and to look for places of wad*". Many landowners at this time were keen to find wad (graphite) on their lands, hoping to make similar financial returns to those being made at the Borrowdale Wad Mine. Mr Dixon was the miller at the Haws Bank Mill. *(Kendal Record Office)*

A Holy mountain

Coniston Old man is revered by the international religious sect known as the Aetherius Society. It has been identified by them as No 5 of seventeen mountains in the world which store and release spiritual energy. The energy is felt to help bring the peoples of the world together. The key position on the Old Man for release of this energy is said to be a flat rock on the main ridge just north of the summit. *(Anthony Robinson,)*

The Two Pigs

The rock feature visible on the Old Man skyline from the Spion Kop workings was known to the quarrymen as the Two Pigs. This name seems to have 'stuck' amongst local fell walkers and is still known as that today. *(Donald Kelly)*

Straw Houses

There are remains of at least two 'straw houses' on Coniston Old Man. Straw Houses were small, dry buildings where powder straw fuses were safely stored ready for use in the quarries. Straws were collected from the fields around the village after the harvest had been brought in. The farms of Spoon Hall and Coniston Hall were reputed to be the best for collecting straws. Powder straw fuses were assembled by the quarrymen themselves by filling the hollow straws with black powder (gunpowder). This production process was often carried out at home on the kitchen table. *(Donald Kelly, Ron Gibson and Doug Birkett)*

The vanishing powder magazine

Gunpowder for use in the quarries was stored in securely locked buildings known as powder magazines. In 1961 the main powder magazine for the Old Man Quarries at Stubthwaite vanished overnight. The following morning quarrymen travelling to work found debris scattered over the fellside. A number of Coniston villagers remembered hearing an explosion during the night. The official cause of the explosion was 'spontaneous combustion' but there were those who believed that human hand had been involved. The remains of the powder magazine are still lying on the fellside. *(Harry Belton, Donald Kelly)*

Early grazing on the mountain

During the Middle Ages the Lords of the Manor of Coniston allowed tenants to graze sheep on Coniston Old Man by renting them parcels of the mountain known as 'stints'. The stints were not segregated by boundary walls but those grazing sheep were expected to prevent their flock from straying into the neighbouring stints. It was because of this requirement that the present day hefting system became so well established on Coniston Old Man. *(Jamie Lund, Dorothy Wilkinson)*

Winter weather

On December 14th 1937 Coniston was affected by severe winter weather. Heavy snow fell for more than 24 hours and drifted in the high wind. Two quarrymen returning down from the high Spion Kop workings were engulfed by an avalanche which swept them some way down the mountain. One managed to dig himself out and raise the alarm but the other was not discovered for over 12 hours. Quarrymen from the village formed themselves into a search team to look for their missing colleague and were out in the extremely arctic conditions all night. *(Mike Brownlee, Ulverston News archives)*

Low water Tarn

This 'rock-basin' tarn became the reservoir for the power station that generated electricity and compressed air for the Old Man Quarries. The level of the tarn has been raised at least twice over the centuries. A long down pipe ('penstock') fed water from the tarn to the pelton wheel situated in The Smithy, at the base of Smithy Bank tip. The route of the pipe ran down the face of the crag in a channel cut for the purpose. The pipe frequently burst and it became the responsibility of Bert Smith, the quarry engineer, to climb the hillside with welding gear or leather straps to fix the leaks. *(Mike Brownlee and Mrs B Smith)*

Hen huts

On the lower slopes of the mountain quarrymen frequently set up hen huts with a few hens in residence and collected eggs each day on their way to and from work. To avoid the hens falling ‘fowl’ of the fox, they often built a dog kennel close to the hen huts and kept a dog there on a long lead, which was an extremely effective deterrent. At least six sites are known close to the Old Man Quarry Road and the Banishead Road. *(Donald Kelly, Maureen Fleming)*

Fire beacon

The summit of the Old Man was used in former centuries as a warning beacon, one of several which formed an extensive communication system warning of Scottish raids and other potential life-threatening events. More recently, important celebrations have been marked in Coniston by local people lighting bonfire beacons on The Old Man summit, including for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and on the occasion of her jubilee. *(Harry Griffin,)*

Earth tremor

In 1935 a significant ‘earth-quake’ was felt in the area. For several days after the tremor quarrymen refused to enter the underground Moss Head system, losing wages as a result. They were proved right to have concern. A roof fall in Middle Moss Head occurred three days after the event and took several weeks to clear. *(Charlie Kelly)*

The Hunt

The local foxhounds usually visited the Old Man twice a year, an occasion which was eagerly looked forward to by those who worked on the mountain. When the hunt was on the Old Man, quarrymen would abandon their work and join in, often following the hounds as far as Cockley Beck or even Eskdale. They would then return to the quarry, often well into the night, collect their tools and head home. *(Jack Tailforth)*

Bert Smith

Bert Smith was the quarry engineer on Coniston Old Man from 1938 until the 1960’s. He was responsible for keeping all the Company’s equipment in the Coppermines, the Smithy and on the mountain in good working order. He eventually left the quarries to follow his other passion of making violins. His skills became internationally acclaimed and his instruments were of the highest quality and in great demand. Bert died in 1973. *(Mrs B Smith, Maureen Fleming)*

Water speed record

On January 4th 1967 quarrymen working at Brossen Stone heard the familiar noise of the engine starting up on *Bluebird*, Donald Campbell’s jet-powdered boat. They downed-tools and went to the tip-end to watch Bluebird skim down to the foot of Coniston Lake – and a few minutes later start the return run. When directly opposite their view point Bluebird somersaulted and disappeared below the surface. *(Donald Kelly, Stormer Walker, Doug Birkett)*

The Brocken Spectre

The summit of the Old Man is said to be one of the best locations on the western seaboard of the British Isles to view the startling phenomenon of the Brocken Spectre. The 'Brocken' consists of an enormous multi-coloured image of oneself cast onto the mist with one's head surrounded by a series of huge haloed rings. Even though there may be a large group of people on the summit, one only ever sees one's own image. It is thought that on only two or three days of the year are conditions right for seeing the phenomenon. The spectre appears when the sun shines from behind a walker who is looking down into mist. On the Old Man it is normally seen in the late morning when mist hangs below the summit in the Low Water Combe. On Christmas Day, 2007, an excellent Brocken was seen from the summit by several local people who had taken the trouble to climb the mountain before lunch. The spectre is named after the Brocken Mountain in Germany. *(Moey Charlesworth, Roy Cooksie, Liz Robinson)*

Goats Water's weather

Coniston Old Man can be hit by freak weather and in particular the coomb that holds the tarn of Goats Water. Over the years there have been numerous reports of water being lifted out of the tarn and cascading onto the Old Man or the buttresses of Dow Crag. Several walkers have reported on the tarn virtually emptying as the mass of water is blown to the northern end. However there do not appear to have been any reports of injury or fatalities. *(Jim Cameron, Harry Griffin)*

Jack Diamond

Jack was a Coniston schoolmaster who originated from Barrow. In his leisure time he was a keen mountaineer and explorer of the fells. At any one time he had several 'projects' on the go of re-building derelict buildings to use as a bothies or mapping out routes over the fells, often accompanied by groups of his pupils from Coniston C of E School. One project was to rebuild the quarry office at Cove Quarries on Coniston Old Man. Sadly, in February 1956 Jack died at the young age of 45. He never saw the Cove Quarries building completed but after his death friends and colleagues did just that, and it is still standing in his memory. *(Harry Griffin)*

Corrupted names

As in many parts of the Lake District, local names and 'visitors' names for a particular feature can be very different. On Coniston Old Man there are a fair share of features with dual names including Low Water Tarn which was once High Water Tarn, Boo Tarn and the Walna Scar Road, which are locally known as Tewitt Tarn and the Banishead Road, and Brossen Stone which became Bursting Stone at the same time the OS 1st Edition was published. Many of these changes were probably caused by surveyors mistakenly noting down the names when the 1st Edition was being prepared. *(Alastair Cameron)*

Refuge from the law

The quarry workings on Coniston Old Man provided a refuge from the law on more than one occasion during the Napoleonic wars. The effect of the war with France on poverty in local communities became critical and in April 1800 a group of quarrymen working on the Old Man marched to Ulverston as an 'organised rabble'. They emptied warehouses of flour, handing it out to local people in the town and then made their escape with what food they could carry, pursued by the militia. None of the quarrymen was caught in the ensuing chase as they made their way back 'to their refuges in their labyrinths, galleries and caves' on the mountain. *(W.G. Collingwood)*

Dickie and John

Nowadays slate from the two quarries still operating on the Old Man is taken down the mountain and onward to Kirkby-in-Furness by heavy four-wheel-drive trucks. In recent times two skilled local drivers, Dickie Walker and John Robinson, have been responsible for this part of Burlington Slate's operation. On a day in 2003, while descending the steep road from Brossen Stone, the brakes on Dickie's truck failed and he had to fight with the wheel all the way down to the Banishead Road to prevent a serious accident. (*Dickie Walker*)

Aerial Ropeways

The transport of slate product down from the production sites on Coniston Old Man to a road access point has always created problems for quarry owners. During the late 19th C a bold decision was made to install an aerial 'flight' from the Spion Kop workings down to the road at Stubthwaite, over 1000ft below. This flight carried up to 5 tonnes of roofing slate at a time from the manufacturing site on the Spion Kop bank and operated almost constantly during the working day. At the bottom of the flight slates were transferred to a narrow gauge railway system which carried the product to a nearby stock-yard where it could be loaded onto carts. The aerial flight was such a success that ropeways became the main system of transport from then on.

White Slate

A most unusual 'rare' form of slate was found at the slate workings on the north east shoulder of the Old Man. 'White Slate' could be split so thinly that it is reputed one could 'see light through it' when holding it up. Two known sites for white slate are Middle Moss Head and Low Bank. Quarrymen at Low Bank in their spare moments manufactured coasters from the slate to sell to walkers passing by towards the summit of the mountain. The Low Bank level is currently blocked at its entrance but if ever cleared may still contain quantities of white slate in the old closehead.