



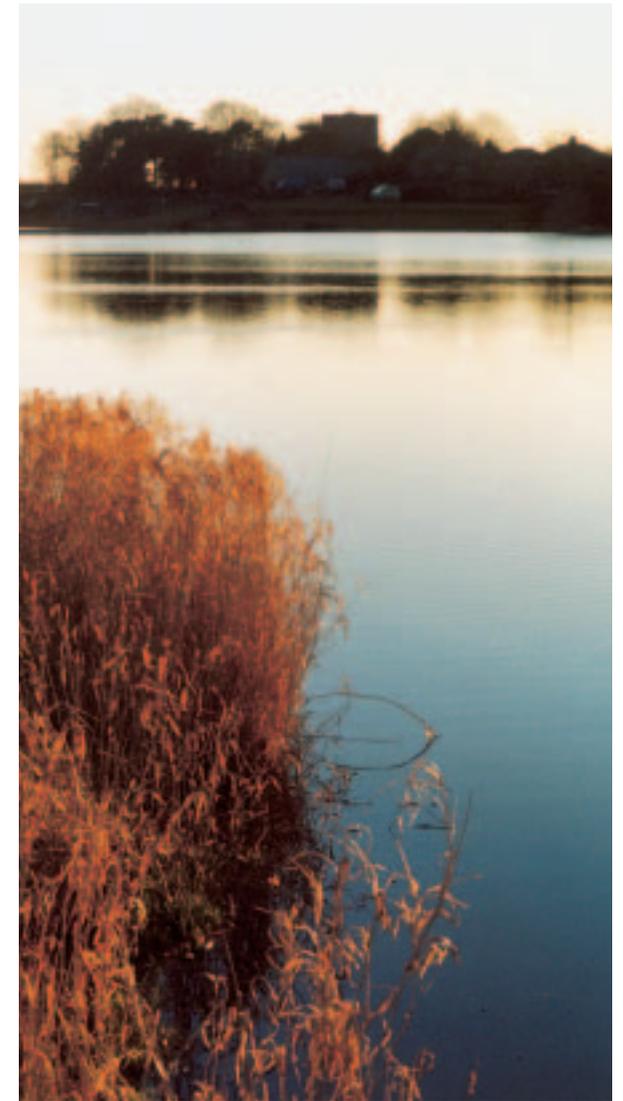
Front cover picture:
SS Mary and Michael from Urswick Tarn, 2003 (SD)
Rear cover picture:
**SS Mary and Michael from southern churchyard,
St Patrick's Day 2003 (SD)**



Hidden Britain Centres help you discover, explore and become part of, the fascinating wealth of local landscape, history, culture, food and community life in undiscovered parts of Cumbria, something that is rarely possible in better known holiday areas, providing a truly different and memorable experience.



first light
Urswick Origins Discovery Programme



By water, by stone

**A Cumbrian church and its landscape:
St Mary the Virgin and St Michael,
Great Urswick, Cumbria**

Steve Dickinson

Introduction

The roots of this superb and timely publication lie in 'passion', the author's passion for archaeology and for this amazing area of Furness in particular, and my own passion for a better understanding and fresh insights into the spiritual heritage of the area and for finding our own part in the continuing journey today.

A passion shared by many other folk.

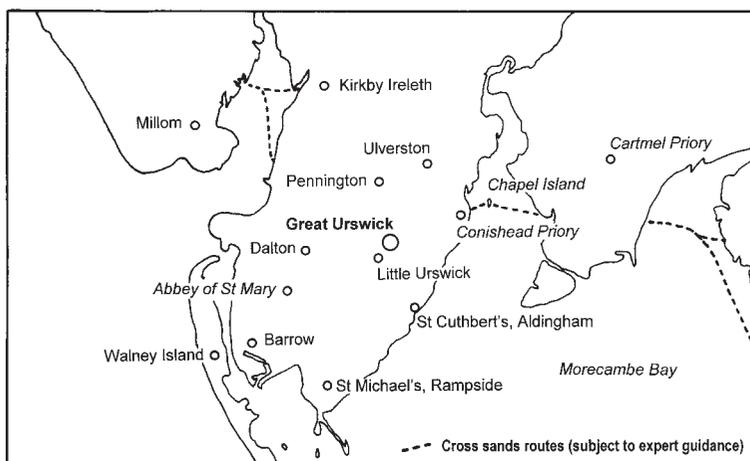
To unearth such amazing 'hidden gems' both within the physical environment of Low Furness and in the people who live here has been an exciting and exhilarating experience and I look forward to so much more in the future.

The Hidden Light Project is a 'community' project within the Hidden Britain concept, and I hope and trust that all who read this booklet and explore the area will come to appreciate the special nature and unique 'feel' of this place.

Colin Honour
Urswick Vicarage
January 2004.

**This booklet is dedicated to the memory of Gwynneth N. Tyson
20.8.1932 - 26.3.2003**

© Hidden Light Association 2004



By water, by stone

If you are expecting a guide to the church of Saint Mary and Saint Michael at Great Urswick, then this, I'm afraid, isn't it! But don't be disappointed. As you read on, I hope you'll understand why it isn't possible – yet – to write such a booklet. Instead, this is an introduction to the land and the peoples who, over thousands of years, have created what we are just beginning to explore and to understand. Churches and landscapes in the past were not created by power and money, but by people. I hope you'll want to explore this fact further after reading *By water, by stone* – and, if you do, there's some contact details at the end of the booklet.

Steve Dickinson, FSAScot., Ulverston 2004

Across the sands

From prehistoric times to the 18th century, Furness was, to all intents and purposes, an island. To the north and north-east, Windermere and the River Leven, Coniston Water, the River Crake and the sinuous crag-bound course of the Duddon valley running south-west from Wrynose Pass effectively restricted easy landward access. The tides of Morecambe Bay and the Duddon Estuary acted as huge natural barriers to the east and west respectively. Yet these were not permanent obstacles, for, when the tides were out, they left great plains of sand and shallow water. Across these glittering levels, people came to Furness for the first time.

Excavations near Scales and Gleaston Mill, backed up by intensive field surveys, have revealed part of the Mesolithic, ('middle' stone age; some 10,000-6000 years ago) flint-using technologies of some of these first settlers. Recent excavations near Eskmeals, north of Millom, and in SE Scotland, show that Mesolithic settlements were sited in locations that not only took advantage of coastal resources, (shellfish, fish, beach stone suitable for tool manufacture); but also accessed inland resources too. Red deer, wild boar and wild cattle could be hunted, and, as human knowledge of the land increased through the hunting cycle, rare sources of stone, such as volcanic tuff from Langdale, were found, remembered and exploited.

The Neolithic, ('new' stone age; some 6000-4200 years ago) axe 'factories' of central Lakeland have an internationally significant reputation. Furness was one of three key areas around the mountain core of Cumbria, (the others being in the Eden Valley, and on the west Cumbrian coast), where distinctive red sandstone outcropped, and could be used to grind and polish the products from these 'factories'. Axes were then traded and/or exchanged across Britain. From the circumstances of their deposition, (for example, burial - sometimes after deliberate breakage - in the ditches of significant large circular enclosure monuments), it is clear that they formed items of great value and prestige.

Cumbria had a unique human and landscape dynamic that created its individual cycle of prehistoric axe production, trade and exchange. This dynamic arguably took the form of a sophisticated, still ill-defined interaction between the people exploiting rare and much-prized stone; and the intricate landscape that secreted it. From our understanding of societies at early stages of transition; from hunting and gathering through to crop production, storage and animal domestication: boundary zones are of critical importance. They define group identities, and help create senses of place and belonging. Furness, being 'islanded'; being a place where 'raw' stone was transformed into prestige items; was certainly a highly significant early prehistoric boundary zone. We can see the sands, fells and water defining it giving passage to humans – but often only under specific conditions of season, time and tide. Understanding these conditions gives us our first hint of what was to shape settlement, belief and identity in Furness right through to the present day.

By water, by stone

So far, Furness – the landscape context for Urswick - has been presented as a bridging point between places and activities. The evidence for 'real people', behind the jargon of the archaeologist, is largely limited to a few stone implements and the occasional pot. However, some 5500 - 5000 years ago, people began to build



Walkers approaching Chapel Island in Morecambe Bay (photo: SD)



The 'Druid's Temple' stone circle, looking east across Morecambe Bay (photo: SD)

astonishing stone monuments in various parts of Britain and Ireland; stone circles. Ranging in size from the huge worked sarsens of Stonehenge in Wiltshire to the more intimate natural boulders of Castlerigg (near Keswick) and Swinside (near Millom); the builders of these sites drew on a wide repertoire of landscape, cultural and social influences. Considered a relatively late, (only 4500-4000 years old) arrival, the 'concentric' stone circle known as the 'Druid's Temple' on Birkrigg Common, 2.5 kilometres east of SS Mary and Michael, was found to contain the cremated remains of people in its roughly cobbled interior – one set under a tiny inverted urn. Excavations in 2001 at Allithwaite, a village near Grange-over-Sands, 11.5 kilometres east of Urswick, revealed a similar series of early Bronze Age cremations. In this case the naturally fissured limestone had provided 'graves' for the burials; some of which were also deposited in inverted urns.

Investigations in a cave at Heaning Wood, just north-west of Great Urswick by the Furness Speleological Group in the late 1950's and early '60's, uncovered a similar human burial situation in a limestone fissure. This time the bones were not cremated but were intact. This, coupled with pottery and a bone pin deposited with them, may

indicate a different prehistoric date of deposition. These burials, described in one account as those of four individuals, were accompanied by 'thousands' of animal bones – including those of pig, deer and wolf. It is possible that the 'Burial Chamber' marked on maps 0.5 kilometre west of Great Urswick was also used in the Bronze Age, although no reliable information about burials from it appears to have survived. Visitors to the site today will find an enormous limestone boulder supported by two other huge stones, one of which has been chocked up on its southern side. A comparable site, at Lligwy on Anglesey, North Wales, has a 24.6 tonne capstone set on boulders surrounding a burial pit that incorporated a natural fissure. When this site was excavated in 1908, it was found to contain the remains of between 15 and 30 individuals, along with flint tools, animal bones, pottery and shells.

These burials in natural voids in the limestone give us some striking clues about prehistoric settlers in Low Furness and their relationships with their ancestors. The Druid's Temple circle, with its magnificent platform setting overlooking the great northern arc of Morecambe Bay, provides an obvious link between the world of stone and certainty and the world of the unknown. This circle and its siting was not just a place of death, but of transformation. The Bay – a place of shifting sands and tides – was there to be negotiated by knowledge and respect. In reflecting the sky and surrounding hills, in its altering states; the Bay was not a fixed, sure place, but an inversion of the world - the world of the ancestors.

The Bronze Age 'fissure burials' appear to be set in a different, secretive landscape, but, in the case of Urswick, this is not quite as it seems. For distinctive geological and geomorphological conditions give rise to springs and often unexpected localised flooding – particularly in the area around the church, the tarn and between the two Urswick villages. Due to improvements in field and beck drainage, and 19th century efforts to provide a controlled outlet for water from the iron mines around Lindal, this is no longer so apparent. In the remote past, we can be sure that it would have been remarkable. An unusual legend, reported in the church guide for 1973, and (at least) prior to this in a 19th century Furness local directory involved, in part, the 'drowning' of a village or township in the tarn. This legend may well find its origin in these earlier inundations.

Settlements and strongholds

Once people began to use bronze tools, swords and ornaments, the special lure of rare stone from the central fells of the Lake District diminished. Changes in climate may also have dictated new forms of activity. What is certain is that the arrival of a more durable metal, iron, was accompanied by big changes in society. In Cumbria, as in other parts of Britain, we find dramatic new forms of Iron Age enclosed settlement. Roundhouses and yards surrounded by thick stone walls appear, particularly in eastern Cumbrian valleys like Kentmere, Patterdale - and here around Urswick.

The best-known of the Urswick area sites is Urswick Stone Walls; consisting of the foundations of a 70 x 100m sub-oval settlement, incorporating the remains of at least five roundhouses. The whole site was built on an immense tilted natural platform on the limestone escarpment overlooking the Urswicks to the south-west. The largest of the roundhouses; that near the centre of the settlement, had an internal diameter of nearly 8.5 metres, and a total diameter of nearly 12 metres. Reconstructions of a similar house based on an overall diameter of 13 metres show that it would have swallowed up the wood from nearly 200 trees and 15 to 20 tonnes of thatching straw. The roof for the Urswick central house alone would have weighed nearly 25 tonnes. The remains of two similar settlements, recorded from Stainton and at Foula, (the latter 1km south-east of Urswick Tarn), can only represent a fraction of such sites which have been lost to agriculture in the 2300 - 1500 years that separate us from their occupation. The implications of the construction of the roundhouses for these sites are clear. The local environment would have been an increasing patchwork of fields and pasture; with woodland pock-marked by clearance for timber and fuel as the local community increased in size.

Urswick Stone Walls was part-dug early in the 20th century, before the advent of modern forensic archaeology, so we can't detail the lives or appearance of its inhabitants. Two features in particular mark it out as being of especial interest. One is that it has a 60m square earthwork annexe, similar to others known from eastern Cumbria, and thought to be late additions from the period of Roman occupation. The other



Looking from the S rampart of Skelmore Heads to Birkrigg Common (photo: SD)

is that it lies adjacent to an iron ore vein at least 400 metres in length; one of a number of such veins running NW-SE in the area. The vein associated with the site has obviously been worked by surface quarrying; and from a 19th century shaft mine near its south-eastern end. Finds of hematite from the excavations of the settlement, and slag from ironworking from a now-destroyed settlement of the same period near Stainton, give us good evidence for later prehistoric and Roman period iron smelting.

The question of how sites like Urswick Stone Walls and its associated resources were controlled is crucial to our understanding of one of the most significant periods in the history of Furness and north-west England. Half a kilometre north-east of Urswick Tarn, occupying a plateau with extensive views north to the Lakeland fells, east to Ingleborough, and south over the tarn and Low Furness; is the spectacular 1.4 hectare hillfort known as Skelmore Heads. Limited excavations in 1957, 1959 and 1960 by a team funded from the University of Liverpool only revealed part of the complexity of this site. One phase of its defences included a timber palisade, (supposedly an Iron Age feature); yet on all sides natural limestone outcrops have been added to by a massive stone rampart. Evidence for this also



Evidence for the early monastic boundary SW of Birkrigg (2m scale) (photo: SD)

shows in some of the excavation sections at a much higher level than the palisade sockets.

Such a rampart, and the size of the site, is typical of a post-Roman or early historic period royal site. Meanwhile, in the field walls in the surrounding landscape, evidence from worked sandstone is accumulating for a long-lost major Roman military site. Air photography is beginning to reveal the details of this and its associated settlement/s in the fields near the Urswick villages. A landscape archaeological research project- *First Light: The Urswick Origins Discovery Programme* – is currently under way to investigate these exciting new discoveries in more depth.

An early church and monastery

Some 1600 years ago, the Roman occupation of Britain was tottering on the brink of collapse (according to some authorities) or transformation, (according to others). Britons had, by the account of the Greek historian, Zosimus, revolted from Roman rule, expelled Roman officials and ‘freed’ [their] cities from barbarian pressure’. The military garrison of the north of the Roman British province had been reduced by Constantine III’s activities in Gaul and Italy. ‘Barbarians’

were not mere enemies. In fact, some were being actively recruited from amongst the sphere of Roman ‘civilised’ influence to aid the British civilian population in its struggle against other ‘barbarians’. The Roman army did not simply consist of Romans – many other peoples had long been recruited to help man it. Dates accepted by some authorities as marking the arrival of the Saxons (c. AD 441-9) may simply flag one of a number of power shifts in an extremely turbulent period when many ‘tyrants’ (so-named by the fifth/sixth century AD British writer Gildas) ruled small territories in these islands.

In this period – which is notoriously tough to track – we can also begin to see clues to the origins of Urswick and its church. For a significant part of the 4th century AD, Christianity had been the state religion of the Roman Empire. This is simple to say – yet there were many different forms of Christian practice and belief, competing with a huge range of pagan rites. One of the earliest, and subsequently to become one of the most influential forms of Christianity in Western Europe, was that which found individuals and communities strictly separated from the world, devoted to a life of religious contemplation and/or service. This was monasticism.

We have already established that Furness was, to many who sought it, or to those who lived here; an island for much of its human history. Islands were the locations of choice for many of the early monastic founders. They fulfilled criteria of remoteness and separation. They were sufficiently detached from the challenges faced by late Roman urban communities to allow the first monks to pursue ideals of solitude. Yet, for those who chose these places in Britain and Ireland in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, they were never quite so removed from the lives of others as to prevent early monastic communities from having to associate and negotiate with post-Roman rulers and their local centres of population, power and prestige. The interweaving of these early monastic and political relationships ultimately empowered independent British and Irish technological and artistic skills. An alliance of such skills with the early Christian faith proceeded to transform the stodgy culture of Late Antiquity into a vibrant new dynamic that spoke to many across the divides of hierarchy, wealth and status.

We can begin to see a local post-Roman power centre here in the landscape around the Urswick villages. Landscape survey, besides revealing tantalising glimpses of Roman Urswick settlement origins, has also demonstrated evidence for both the inner and outer boundaries of a massive, previously unidentified, early Christian monastery; the buildings of which, with the exception of the church, have disappeared. One of the critical elements of this fascinating, and exceptionally important site, is its early church. When was this founded, and by whom? What was its status over time? To whom was it first dedicated? How did it evolve in relation to the monastic site? Who built it, and to whom did they owe their allegiance? Detailed answers to these, and many other questions, will only come through further archaeological and historical analyses.

Direct evidence for the early Christian importance of Urswick can be seen in the form of three inscribed and/or sculpted stones in the church. The first of these is a slab of pale gritstone that forms the threshold between the nave and the belfry. From the letter forms revealed through flash photography in March 2003 on its (currently inaccessible) underside; this stone is considered to display part of a rare 5th-8th century AD memorial dedication. The second stone is on the sill of the tall nave window closest to the church porch door, though it was found in 1911 acting as a lintel to the easternmost south nave window (hence its peculiar shape – it was cut and reused). This is another rarity – one of only 37 English examples. It is part of an Anglo-Saxon sandstone cross, originally some 3 metres high, known as the 'Tunwini' Cross. Its design contains a memorial dedication in the earliest English script – runes.

The Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria was, through the expansionist policies of its kings, drawn to compete for power and land in Rheged; one (sixth century AD British) predecessor of the present county of Cumbria. Part of the significance of the Tunwini Cross lies in the fact that it is an advertisement for English Northumbria. If you were a Briton, speaking no English, here was a statement in stone of who claimed control over your territory, beliefs and everyday life. Yet if we look closer, we can see all is not quite as it seems.



The 'Tunwini Cross', showing the face with the runic inscription and the two carved figures (photo: Peter Cottam © Hidden Britain)

The runes on the cross don't fit the panel designed to take them. They cut the panel's frame, and run between, and over, two figures carved beneath it – a feature drawn from early historic Irish Christian stone sculpture. Careful analysis of key parts of the runic inscription has demonstrated that names included in it have been overcut. It seems that the principal objective of this act was to disguise earlier names that link the inscription to the figures below the panel. The analysis

allows us to suggest that these are two early Christian clerics – one named Luigne from the 7th century AD Ionan monastic community in western Scotland, the other, (originally from Tarsus in SE Turkey), considered to be Theodore, the 7th Archbishop of Canterbury (who died in 690 AD). Tunwini is named on the top line of the inscription. His name is also an overcutting of that of another, who presumably did most of the work in creating this memorial to Theodore; Luibe.

More than any other monument, the Tunwini Cross reveals the ‘hidden landscape’ of Urswick to us. We can easily see water and stone. However, were it not for the chance survival and recovery of this remarkable monument, critical elements of very different 1300 year-old territories - of belief, power and control - would remain in complete darkness. For those who can see no relationship between past and present; the art and inscription on this cross fragment reminds us all of the delicate boundary separating our concerns from those of earlier communities.

Urswick’s third early Christian period sculpted stone, giving us further clues to the continuity of community worship on this site, is part of a story particular to the lands around the northern part of the Irish Sea. This story is rich in myth, with the facts, as is usually the case, being more remarkable than any speculation.

Raids and trading

Serious historians and archaeologists often make a distinction between Viking and Norse/Scandinavian settlement in the British Isles. The term ‘Viking’, strictly speaking, refers to the earliest -infamous - phases of trade and raiding activity; where no permanent settlement was involved. The word ‘Viking’ was rarely used by the people themselves, and, when it was, it referred to men who had gone ‘a-viking’; or had taken to piracy or trading from ‘viks’ – creeks or inlets in the language of their homelands. ‘Vik’ finds a parallel in *wic* – Anglo-Saxon for a trading settlement. A convincing case for Urswick’s earliest name-form, (as recorded in Domesday), is *Chiluestreuc*: the *uic* being an Anglo-Saxon *wic* (*Chil* = Gaelic *Kil* = Latin *cella* = monastic cell).

The start of the ‘Viking’ period is considered by most historians to coincide with the attack in AD 793, recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, on the island monastery of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria. Furness, in common with many other regions around the Irish Sea and across northern Britain, was subject to raids from many peoples following the collapse of Roman administration at the start of the 5th century AD. From this point until the 8th and 9th centuries, the Irish, Picts, Scots, British and Anglo-Saxons all contributed to warfare in this area – which was contested territory. Vikings were just another group of warriors to add to the mixture.

Cumbrian place-names derived from Old Norse are considered by many to provide evidence for Viking activity. *Thwaites*, (clearings; eg: Walthwaite near Pennington), *-scales* (huts; eg: Scales village south of Urswick) and *-bys*, (hamlets, villages; eg: Kirkby-in-Furness) are typical of those often quoted as Viking in origin. However, the evidence from the Loppergarth, (near Pennington, about 2km north of Urswick) runic *tympanum* contradicts this, (a *tympanum* is a specifically cut stone feature designed to fill a gap between the top of a church door and the arch above it). The Loppergarth example clearly shows, through its mixture of English and Old Norse runes – that the Old Norse language had mingled with Old or Middle English by the 12th century AD, (the date conventionally assigned to the *tympanum* through its ornament). A merging of script allows us to see a merging of language, and the script on this ‘12th century’ stone shows that many supposed ‘Viking’ place-names could easily have been created late in the Norse/Scandinavian period of *settlement* – even into the period when Furness was subject to Norman control. Unfortunately they cannot tell us anything about raids and trading.

When we come to isolated finds – such as a sword fragment found in 1909 at St Michael’s, Rampside (near Barrow), we get closer to firm ground. Acknowledging that some of these finds were perhaps interred as heirlooms, they nevertheless give us glimpses of burials – and pagan (as opposed to Christian) burials at that (Christians were not supposed to be buried with grave-goods). Rampside is certainly close to our model ideal of the situation of a Viking burial – close to the sea and the early seaways. It finds eloquent echoes in grave-goods from other ‘Viking burials’ in coastal locations in Ireland, the Isle of Man and Western Scotland. These are areas where the Scandinavian



Urswick from the SE. SS Mary and Michael is in the trees at centre right (photo: SD)

settlers of Furness are supposed to have originated – indeed, some historians maintain that they arrived as late as the tenth century AD as second or third generation ‘Scandinavians’ – or ‘Norse/Irish’.

Monasteries, such as that at Urswick, and their estates were targets for Viking activity; recorded in early historic annals and chronicles. Their populations of unarmed clerics and civilians, their undefended enclosures and buildings and rich contents singled them out as prime candidates for Viking attention. A key Urswick connection with this period is the third sculpted stone. This fragment of sandstone, found in 1909 when the north wall of the chancel was being pierced to create a recess for an organ, is part of the shaft and neck of a 10th-11th century AD ring-headed cross. A reconstruction of the complete cross appears in a painting on the wall near the Urswick church font. From the design of the fragment, scholars consider that this cross was related by art style to others of Scandinavian age in northern and western Cumbria. This was a period of settlement, not raiding. The presence of a Scandinavian Christian monument here is arguably linked to the large number of *how* and *haw* field name-elements in the old Urswick civil parish – more than in the rest of Low Furness. These elements are derived from the Old Norse *haugr* = mound. Together they speak volumes about the continuing significance of the site as we approach yet another stage in its transformation.

Shifts of power

Around 1000 AD, the land we now know as Cumbria was populated by folk from Gaelic Scotland and Ireland, Scandinavia, Anglo-Saxons from the south and the east, and, last but not least, Cumbrian and Scottish (Strathclyde) Britons. Control of the remote Furness peninsula was dependent upon who could maintain local allegiance amongst a polyglot group of landholders. Absentee lords such as Tostig, Earl of Northumbria, (killed in 1066) and Roger de Poitou, (stripped of his possessions after treasonable activity in 1102), were no substitute for someone with the ability to match local entitlement with direct action.

In 1127 a group of monks from the abbey at Savigny in Normandy moved from Tulketh, near Preston, to a site in Bekansgill near what is now the town of Barrow-in-Furness. Considered by many to have deliberately sought depopulated and uncultivated locations for their foundations, the Norman clerics ran up against Henry I's vassal in the area; Michael le Fleming.

Le Fleming had been granted much of Low Furness at some time between 1107 and 1111. The Domesday survey, which dealt in a cursory fashion with some of the major Furness estates in 1086-9, clearly shows that much of the area (then known as *Hougun*) was not only populated and cultivated, but that there was also one other village or estate with a church (*Cherchebi*); in addition to that already existing at Urswick. Elsewhere in England, the Normans were adept at using pre-existing Anglo-Saxon structures to bolster their territorial and political claims. Where no such structures existed they planted them – from castles to whole towns and churches.

Given this fact, we might have expected le Fleming to have seized the ancient centre and church to act as the symbolic and actual core of his manor, which was later to become known as *Muchland* = Michael's land. Instead, he chose Aldingham, on the Morecambe Bay coast 3.5km SE of Urswick, for his motte-and-bailey castle and principal church, (with its own Anglo-Saxon cross; a heavily-weathered fragment of which is still visible at the base of St Cuthbert's NE chancel wall). The chief reason for this is probably that Aldingham was not only an easily accessible landing and embarkation point for sea traffic, but that

it is also an excellent signalling point, visible from many places across the Bay; particularly the Norman town and castle at Lancaster. Le Fleming may also have wanted to capitalise upon the association of the popular Northern English saint, Cuthbert, with this site.

Does this mean that Urswick fell into a decline around this point? Judging from architectural evidence from elsewhere around Furness, this seems highly unlikely. Churches – or recorded evidence from churches - at Beck Side, Kirkby Ireleth (another St Cuthbert's), Ulverston (St Mary's), Dalton (another St Mary's), Pennington (St Leonard's, later to become St Michael and the Holy Angels), and probably Rampside (St Michael's) all show traces of Norman building work. There seem to be no clear remains of such building activity at Urswick; yet the monks of the new Norman abbey significantly claimed the patronage of just two Furness churches; those at Urswick and Dalton, *prior* to their arrival on the peninsula. The continuing importance of Urswick is marked by the fact that the new abbey laid claim to Little Urswick, but, in ceding it to Michael le Fleming after 1153, kept the patronage, (the right of presentation of a vicar to the parish); and then appropriated the church itself in 1228. The Abbey of St Mary had the patronage of the church until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1537.

At the Dissolution the possessions of the Abbey passed into private hands; adding to a variegated patchwork of lordship and ownership in Low Furness. The Manor of Muchland had passed to the Harrington family in the late 13th century, and it was probably under their ownership that Gleaston Castle, 3km S of Urswick, was built. Subordinate medieval manors relevant to Urswick include Bolton with Adgarley, (with its own chantry chapel), Much Urswick, (the small manor house for which used to stand to the NE of Urswick Tarn), Little Urswick and Bardsea (again with its own chantry chapel). These subsidiary manors may date back to a le Fleming grant of 1212; or to a much earlier territorial arrangement.

Confusingly, SS Mary and Michael appears on 19th century maps, and in some historical sources, simply as St Mary's Church (or St Mary-in-the-Fields); standing isolated between the villages of Great and Little Urswick. Urswick's unusual twin dedication (to SS Mary and Michael) cannot relate to Michael le Fleming, as some have thought; for very



St. Cuthbert's, Aldingham from the NE (photo:SD)



Gleaston Castle from the SE (photo: SD)



The 2002 Rushbearing Ceremony at Urswick (photo: Mr and Mrs Perry)

few churches were ever dedicated to local lords or landowners. A simple historically-based case, supported by research by local historians W.G.Collingwood and W.Rollinson, may connect it instead, at the very least, to this period of Norman church control. St Mary the Virgin – mother of Jesus, was accorded special veneration in the medieval period, and by the Reformation over 2000 (out of around 9700) churches were dedicated to her; including that of the Abbey of St Mary of Furness in Bekansgill.

St Michael was often seen as a warrior conducting heavenly battles, yet he was also a guardian; and intercessor for the sick and the damned. By the close of the Middle Ages in England over 686 churches were dedicated to him. At Urswick the name St Michael's Stirrup is applied, on the 1850 Ordnance Survey Map, to what still appears today, on the western edge of Birkrigg Common, to be the remains of a prehistoric burial monument. An important Urswick community rush-bearing festival, (harking back to a medieval ceremony replacing the rushes which used to be strewn on earthen church floors) can be seen to have its continuing autumnal observance in part due to his medieval cult, and feast-day of 29 September. This brings us to the local people who, more than any other group or individual, have cared for SS Mary and Michael and all it represents since its foundation.

Church, community and family

Behind the details of medieval territorial control and favoured saints, we need to remind ourselves that there was a living community at Urswick - centred on a working landscape of strip fields, evidence for of which can still be seen in the landscape around the villages. In medieval times, practically every aspect of life in this community, from baptism through to death, was guided by the Church. Tithes were paid to it. Its bells sounded the time, marked all important events, and were a constant reminder of its presence. Regular attendance at mass and confession was obligatory, for, prior to the Reformation, everyone was Catholic. The parish priest was literally the community's confidant, and because until the 16th century there were no printed books, and the mass was in Latin, many aspects of church liturgy would have appeared mysterious and difficult to comprehend. A free Grammar School was founded in Little Urswick in 1580 thanks to an endowment by William Marshall; prior to this, local sources of education would have been in the hands of the parish priest, and the Abbey of St Mary (until 1537).

People who come to worship at SS Mary and Michael today; to celebrate key moments in their and other lives, and mark the passing of friends and relations, would, if they could, be able to see the people of past ages, perhaps over 1600 years, doing precisely the same things. This 'continuity in place' is a feature oft-repeated in English parish histories. Yet this is not a history. History is, basically, the study of things and people who have gone. We celebrate continuity; a living place and a lively community instead.

Recent work by local historian John Marshall has emphasised a form of 'habitual territory' for the local communities of Furness; based on a distinctive and recognisable landscape. Standing on Birkrigg Common overlooking the area, we can see exactly what he means. But there are invisible territories binding this landscape together too; ties of blood, family and kin allegiance – even if they can't be studied on a map and walked over on the ground. The lives and legacies of 'ordinary' local families remain to be woven into the distinctive historical personality of Urswick and Low Furness. This will give us all much more than a map – a universe of lives and beliefs – to match this beautiful land of water, and of stone.

A brief tour of the church and environs of Saint Mary and Saint Michael
(the numbers are keyed to the sketch view opposite)

There are many clues, both in the fabric, (masonry and architectural features) of the church, and the layout of its churchyard, which suggest an extremely complex and long-term evolution of both:

1. The Churchyard was extended to the west (in 1906) and the east (in the 1930's); the eastern part being in use today for burials and cremation services. The northern limit of the yard is marked today by a stone wall, but a series of yew trees planted in a rough semi-circle within it may indicate the course of a much earlier enclosure boundary. Those yews to either side of the main church gate were planted in 1855; the one on the left (as you enter it) by James Ashburner of Bardsea, the one on the right by Malachi Cranke of Hawkfield. To the south of the church, a whole series of 18th-19th century graves, (notable family vaults include those of the Smiths, Gales and Pettys) are laid out over a platform of earlier features. This platform has an eastern terraced edge (marked by a series of pine trees), and can be followed into the Glebe Field further to the south. This terrace edge is inferred to mark part of the eastern circuit of the inner early Christian monastic *vallum*.

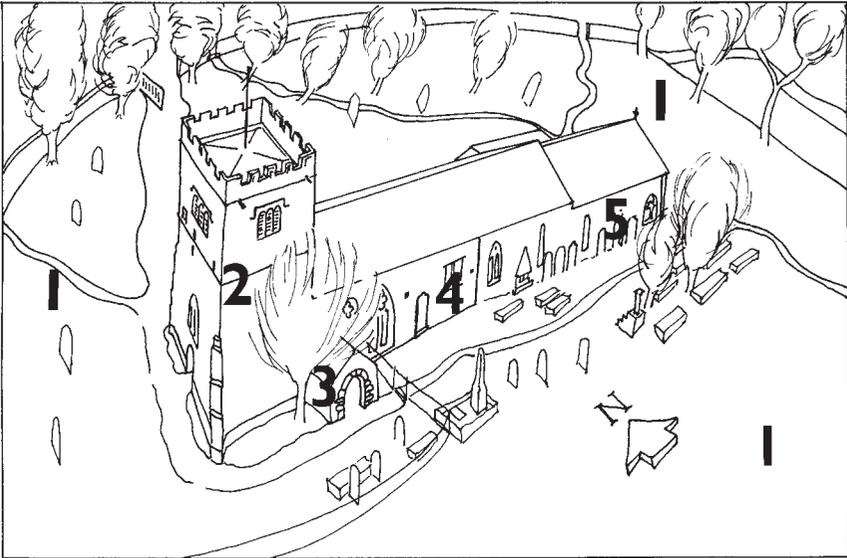
South of the nave is an 18th century sundial bearing the initials of the churchwardens of 1722, (Jon Park of Bardsea, George Postlethwaite of Great Urswick, William Addison of Little Urswick and John Marshall of Stainton and Adgarley), with steps and head rebuilt in the 1920's.

2. The Western Tower. With walls at its base some 1.5 metres thick and a sequence of fabric changes, the belfry has obviously been constructed in several stages. Some of its characteristics, particularly the thick walling and lack of windows on the northern and southern faces, are similar to those of so-called 'fortified' or defensible churches erected mainly in the 14th and 15th centuries AD in northern Cumbria and the Scottish Borders. The statue in a niche high on the left (as you look at it) on the western face is a 'Mater Dolorosa' or 'Pieta' – depicting the Virgin Mary with the body of Jesus in her arms.

3. The Porch. This displays an early Christian sundial on one of its western entrance stones (see if you can spot it – it has a small 'gnomon', or central hole for a pin, the shadow of which marked the time on nearby sectors subdivided to indicate service times). The vertical grooves on one of the eastern entrance stones were reputedly formed by Elizabethan archers sharpening arrows prior to target practice. The porch is not bonded with the south nave wall, showing that it is a later addition.

4. The South Nave Wall. Inferred to be one of the earliest parts of the whole building. The present windows are a real medley of different styles and dates; all have been inserted into earlier fabric. The distinctive square holes some 2.25m up in the external wall are 'putlog holes' designed to carry horizontal timbers upon which scaffolding floorboards rested. Each marks the position of a filled-in small round-headed window. See if you can spot a damaged Roman phallic symbol quite high up, near the junction with the south chancel wall.

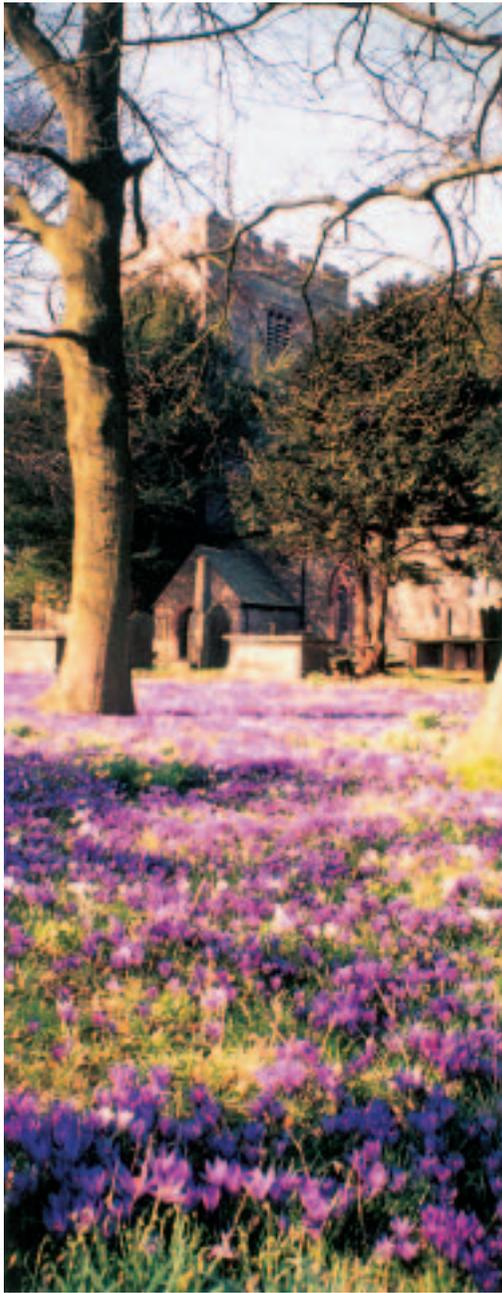
5. **The South Chancel Wall.** Look out for traces of a filled-in earlier door-head above the present south chancel door, for dressed and worked sandstone, (some of which is inferred to be Roman) in the adjacent walls.



Principal references

Across the sands: Mesolithic and Neolithic drawn in part from Hunter, J. and Ralston, I., (eds.) 1999; *The Archaeology of Britain; An introduction from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Industrial Revolution* (Routledge). **By Water, by stone:** see Burl, A., 2000; *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (Yale) 112-3; Heaning Wood: Holland, E., G., 1967; *Underground in Furness* (Dalesman) 42-3. **Settlements and strongholds:** Urswick Stone Walls; Bowden, M., (ed.), 2000; *Furness Iron* (English Heritage) 12-13. Skelmore Heads; Powell, T.G.E., et al.; Excavations at Skelmore Heads near Ulverston, 1957 and 1959: *Cumberland and Westmorland Antiq. and Arch.Soc. (CWAAS) Transactions Ser.2*, 63, 1963; 1-30. **An early church and monastery:** Dickinson, S., 2002; *The Beacon on the Bay* (Ulverston). **Raids and trading:** Pennington tympanum; Gaythorpe, H.; The Runic Tympanum lately found at Pennington: *CWAAS Transactions Ser.2*, 3, 1903; 373-379. Great Urswick third sculpted stone; Bailey, R.N. and Cramp, R., 1988; *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture Vol.II, Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire-North-of-the-Sands* (British Academy/OUP); 150-1. **Shifts of power:** Page, W. (ed.); 1914/1966; *The Victoria County History of the Counties of England; Vol.VIII; A History of Lancashire* (Univ. of London): SS Mary and Michael dedication: Graham, T.H.B. and Collingwood, W.G.; Patron Saints of the Diocese of Carlisle: *CWAAS Transactions Ser.2*, 25, 1925; 1-27; Rollinson, W., 1996; *The Lake District; Life and Traditions* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson); 49-55. **Church, community and family:** Marshall, J.D.; Communities, Societies, Regions and Local History. Perceptions of locality in High and Low Furness: *The Local Historian*, Vol.26.1, 1996; 36-47. **Also:** Urswick Parochial Church Council Guide, 1973: *Urswick Church; St.Mary & St.Michael; 1000 Years of History* (Urswick), and Pollitt, L., 1977: *The Parish Church of St.Mary and St.Michael* (Urswick).

For further details about Urswick, Hidden Light, Low Furness and the First Light archaeological project centred on Urswick, visit: www.explorelowfurness.co.uk or e-mail: goi90@dial.pipex.com



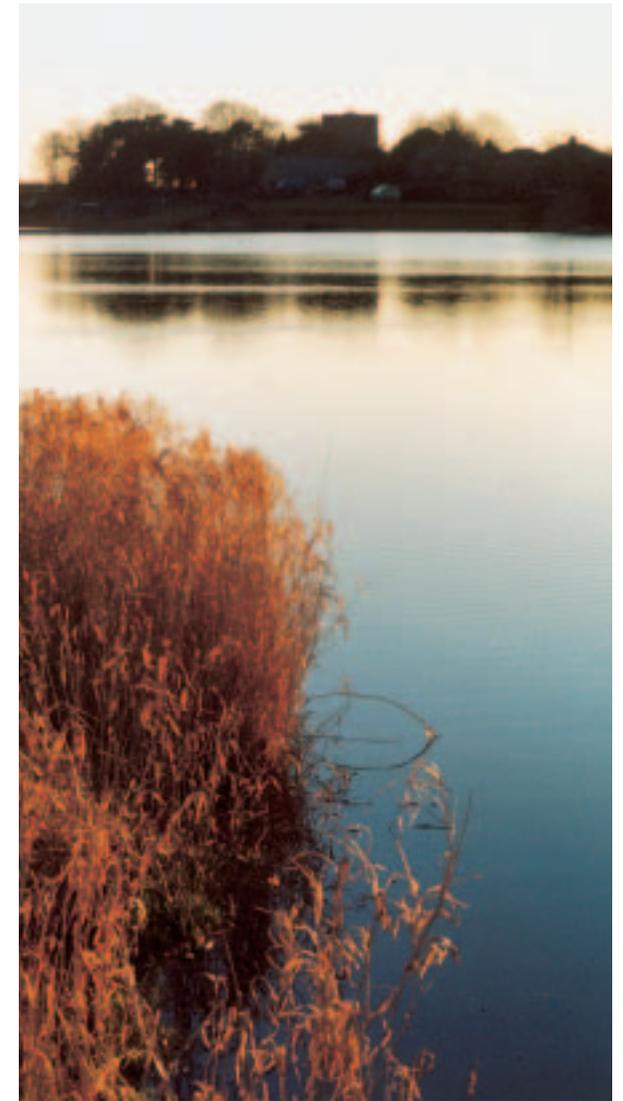
Front cover picture:
SS Mary and Michael from Urswick Tarn, 2003 (SD)
Rear cover picture:
**SS Mary and Michael from southern churchyard,
St Patrick's Day 2003 (SD)**



Hidden Britain Centres help you discover, explore and become part of, the fascinating wealth of local landscape, history, culture, food and community life in undiscovered parts of Cumbria, something that is rarely possible in better known holiday areas, providing a truly different and memorable experience.



first light
Urswick Origins Discovery Programme



By water, by stone

**A Cumbrian church and its landscape:
St Mary the Virgin and St Michael,
Great Urswick, Cumbria**

Steve Dickinson