



National
Trust

The Neolithic Period in Borrowdale

A history by Andy Warner

The secrets of the stones

why? we ask
and the wind whispers clues
teases with a song as wide as the sky
words lost in laughter

why here?
but the hills keep their silence
offer only shadows

who were you?
and the echoes in the stones
just sigh as if too wise to break the spell
with answers

Martin Bagness 2009

Castlerigg Stone Circle

Compared to the great (and slightly more modern) circle at Stonehenge, Castlerigg is not that impressive, but here the situation is everything. Sitting up above the surrounding valleys, it is surrounded by the most glorious ring of high fells. Looking in all directions it is easy to appreciate why this innocuous hill was chosen as the site, for clearly this is the focal point for the entire area.

Dating from the Late Neolithic period – around 2,500BC – the circle comprises some 38 stones with an additional 10 stones forming a small rectangular setting, “The Sanctuary”, located in the eastern quarter. The underlying rock of the site is Skiddaw Slate, but the stones themselves are of volcanic origin. And that is pretty much the extent of our actual knowledge of the Circle. The rest is still, 4,500 years later, a mystery. Of course there has been much speculation, many theories, but the Circle holds its secrets well and nothing has proven conclusive. The site sits at a crossroads of possible communication routes, east to the tribes of the Eden valley, north and west to the coast, south to the axe factories. A religious place? A prehistoric parliament? A bartering market for stone axes? Some sort of seasonal calendar? It could be any, or all of these. It should be borne in mind that the Circle has a very long history, and as cultures changed, so too could the usage of the site. The monumental nature of the circle suggests that its construction could be seen as a sort of culminating feature to the end of a truly revolutionary era. It is time to take a large step even further back in time...

Picture this:

It is 7000 years ago and the great glaciers that covered the area have finally melted. In their wake is a land that is at once both beautiful and devastated. In the valley bottoms are jewel like lakes. There are classic U shaped valleys, and steep fellsides, sprinkled with crags and scree, rearing

up to the gnarled and rugged fell tops. Some 3,000 to 4,000 years later when people started to travel through the area, what was later to become the Lake District was a true wilderness; the valley bottoms an undrained marshy waste, liberally strewn with boulders, and covered in a tangled mass of woodland. No roads, tracks or paths penetrated this wild land; nothing easy to aid progress. Bears and wolves roamed the land, and wild boar grazed the woodland. Why on earth should mankind ever want to come here? What was in it for them? Stone axes that's what!



Castlerigg Stone Circle, a megalithic circle of 38 stones, Derwentwater, Lake District, Cumbria.

A Neolithic revolution

The very early Cumbrians lived on the coast. By 4,000 BC Neolithic man was becoming a more organised and refined beast, still hunting, still gathering, but now also herding to keep his source of food closer to home. To do this they needed to make clearings in the woodland that blanketed the area, and pollen analysis has shown that vegetation clearance was taking place at spots such as Ehenside Tarn. Here and further down the coast at Bootle there are indications that there were attempts to grow cereals. Later they would start to spin wool, weave cloth, and cast pots. Some have called it the Neolithic Revolution. And the tools that drove this cultural change were made of stone, the principal one being the axe.

The geology of the Lake District is complex, but the central core is basically volcanic in origin, formed from numerous eruptions some 450 million years ago, and comprising hard lava beds interspersed with softer tuff bands. (Tuff is compressed volcanic ash) Some of the tuff bands have been altered becoming tough and flinty and therefore more resistant to weathering. These outcropping Seathwaite Fell Tuffs that spread from Great Langdale to Glaramara and Scafell Pikes produced ideal rock to create stone axes. But how on earth did Neolithic man, some 5,000 years ago, discover these remote and sporadic

sites? It suggests that they had a surprising knowledge of the fells, and that they had a practical grasp of simple geology, the ability to distinguish the characteristics of differing rock types. Altogether a whole lot more intelligent than their primitive typecasting would imply.

Archaeological evidence shows that the axes were only roughed-out at the factory sites. The topography of the land and further scanty evidence suggests that Borrowdale may have formed a conduit for transportation out to the coastal settlements. Paths may have developed down through Langstrath, and probably over Thorneythwaite fell, converging in the middle valley, thence somehow through the tangle of the Jaws of Borrowdale before reaching Derwentwater. Did they boat the stone down through the lakes? Who knows? At the coast the axes would be smoothed and polished using sharp quartz sand and sandstone grinders. Whilst some would be retained for domestic use, the vast majority were exported. Cumbrian axes have been found as far afield as South-west Scotland, Yorkshire, and North Cornwall. Was Castlerigg, and maybe other stone circles, part of this trading network?