Examining the Value of Place-Names as Evidence for History, Landscape and Language in Westmorland

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Introduction

The historic county of Westmorland in North West England has been a site of competing cultural and political areas of influence from the post-Roman period until its official absorption into Cumbria in 1974 (Sedgefield 1915: xi-xiv). Arguably, this dynamic can largely be traced back to Westmorland's geography and its proximity to both the English-Scottish border and the Irish Sea. Today, the area's history of competing and coexisting linguistic influences, along with the evolving relationships between its inhabitants and the landscape, are perhaps most vividly reflected in the place-names they left behind (ibid.:xiii). On this basis, this paper analyses 40 place-names from the historic county of Westmorland. As is the case for large parts of England, most names are Old English (OE) in origin; however, an unusually large proportion of place-names in the present corpus also exhibits Old Norse (ON) linguistic influence, which was to be expected given the historical background of Norwegian settlers in this area. Of note, there are four place-names of potential Brittonic origin, and two in which the affix is of Latin origin. There is one name of Old French origin. I will divide the place-names into three categories, namely by whether they are topographical, habitative or personal in nature, and within each section discuss the linguistic origins of the names, with a focus on examining how the details fossilised within them offer insights into the intersecting histories, languages, and landscape of Westmorland.

Topographical Names

Topographical place-names can offer insights on how the historical landscape was perceived by people, and which features might have been seen as particularly significant. Almost half (18) of the names discussed in this paper can be assigned to this category. Interestingly, fourteen of these topographical names contain an ON element, which is unsurprising given the striking variety of vocabulary for landscape in the ON languages.

The topography of Westmorland is characterised by hills, valleys, and ridges, and the place-names in the present corpus seem to accurately reflect this. For instance, there are seven names that contain the ON element **dalr**, 'valley'. These are Kendal, Little Langdale, Longsleddale, Martindale, Rydal, Patterdale, and Ravenstonedale. Notably, in Langdale the OE **denu**, which can be seen in earlier attestations of the name, was replaced by the ON **dalr**. Seemingly, this element must have been replaced between 1475 ('*Longdene*') and 1578 ('*Langdal(e)*'), which the English Place Name Survey (EPNS) suggests happens frequently (PN We 1: 203). Interestingly, in Longsleddale, the ON **dalr** has been added tautologically to OE **slæd** (Mills 2011), which can be seen as evidence of language contact between ON and OE speakers. What is more, the affix **lang** ('long'), which was first attested in the spelling *Langsleiddall* c. 1466, appears to specifically describe the notable length of the River Sprint's valley, which stretches for more than six kilometres (PN We 1: 160).

Another name that refers to a valley is Mardale. Notably, this is the only instance where the OE **dæl** is the origin of a valley description in the chosen area. The village was flooded in order to create Haweswater Reservoir in the late 1930s (Walsh 2022), which could be why the first element **mere,** 'lake', cannot be related to a corresponding natural landscape feature. Hugill, 'the high ravine' refers to the steep valley that runs north between the Gowan and Hugill Hall and Heights (PN We 1: 169-70). In the course of time, the rather rare generic **geil** in this name was replaced by the more common **gil**, which can be seen in the earlier spellings. Seemingly, this replacement must have happened between 1274, where the spelling *Hugayl* was attested, and 1341, where **gil** can be seen for the first time in *Hogill* (ibid.). Crook, a

simplex name which is ambiguous in origin, as it either originated from the ON **krókr** or, less likely, OE ***crōc*** (PN We 1: 127-8), refers to 'land in a bend' or 'secluded corner of land'. Indeed, the settlement is situated in a corner of a valley, as illustrated below.
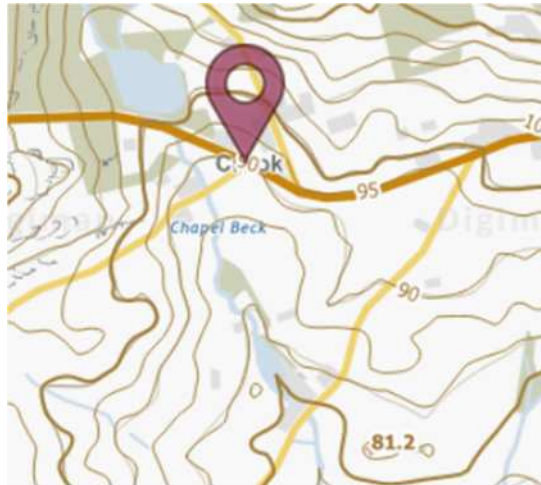

Figure 1: Topographic map of Crook, 'secluded corner of land'

Hills are referred to in the names New Hutton and Old Hutton, where the element **hōh** describes a hill or spur of land (PN We 1: 127). The affixes that distinguish these two settlements are interesting with respect to their linguistic influences. Old Hutton was first attested as *'Hoton'* in the Domesday Book of 1086 (ibid.), with the next documented iteration being *'Vetus Hotun'* c. 1332. The added affix is Latin for 'old', and originates in the period following the Norman Conquest when medieval Latin was used as an administrative language (ibid.). The same change can be observed in New Hutton, which was first attested in 1274, to which the Latin affix **nova,** 'new', was added at roughly the same time, documented as *Noua Hoton* c. 1337 (PN We 1: 129). Interestingly, other attestations of New Hutton provide a different affix, namely 'in the Hay' (*Hoton in Laya* c. 1238; *Hoton en le Haye* c. 1303) (ibid.), which shows influence from Old French. Notably, New Hutton is the only name in this corpus that demonstrates this particular influence.

Another name that refers to a hill is Underbarrow, which denotes a '(place) under the hill'. Consulting a topographic map, it becomes evident that the settlement is located at the foot of a prominent hill, Scout Scar.

Figure 2: Map of Underbarrow with contour lines

Rivers and watercourses are also dominant features in the landscape of Westmorland, and are accordingly reflected in the place-names. Knowing where the ground is wet or dry is clearly important in order to permanently settle an area, and access to watercourses can be a great advantage to a community. However, proximity to water can also present challenges, particularly in the form of floodings. Notably, four of the names in the corpus originate from those of rivers. Firstly, Lowther is named after the eponymous river, from which the village is about two kilometres in distance. The name could either be of ON origin, and describe a foamy river, or possibly of Brittonic origin. It is worth noting that the settlement is located on top of a hill next to the river, and, since there is a steep hillslope, access to it seems to be limited. However, this also means that the settlement would not be subject to flooding because of the river. A second settlement that carries the same name as a river is Winster. Similarly, as with Lowther, the river name Winster could be ON, 'the left one', or Brittonic, 'white stream', in origin. This settlement is also located on a hill next to the valley through which the river flows, and is thus protected from flooding. In both Kendal and Kentmere, the specific refers to the river Kent, which is a Brittonic name of uncertain origin. Both lie in the valley of the river Kent. The generic in Kentmere suggests a 'pool' near the river, but in the modern landscape there is a reservoir which likely obscures the eponymous feature. As is reflected in the names of the area in question, potamonyms have the highest survival rate among place-names, and many of them were carried over from the Brittonic by the Anglo-Saxon settlers (Gelling 2000: 10).

There are several other names that refer to water in the landscape of the chosen area. For instance, Cliburn contains the OE **burna,** 'stream', which refers to the small River Leith. Interestingly, the specific denoting a cliff or bank might refer to the hillslope from which the name of the Leith originated (PN We 2: 136). Further, the names Grasmere, 'grassy-shored lake', and Windermere, 'lake of a man called Vinandr' are both hydronyms derived from lakes, with Lake Windermere forming the natural boundary to neighbouring Lancashire. Notably, Mardale also contains a reference to a lake in the specific. Troutbeck is a complex name made up of the OE **truth,** 'trout', and the ON **bekkr,** 'stream'. Interestingly, the element **bekkr** is especially popular in areas where Norwegian or Danish settlements were located (Gelling 2000: 14) and further, it is the most commonly used element to refer to a stream among place-names in Westmorland (ibid.). A final name that exhibits a connection to water is Morland. Indeed, the ON specific **mór** describes 'moor or marsh' – referring to wet ground. Meanwhile, the ON generic **lundr** describes a grove, referring to a wooded area.

A name that exhibits a combination of watery ground and woodland is Staveley, 'grove or glade where the staves are gathered'. This name contains the element **lēah,** which has a variety of meanings, including 'wood', 'clearing', 'pasture', and 'meadow', but in this case is generally read as wood or glade (PN We: 171). The presence of the specific **stafa** indicates that this was a place known for its natural resources. In this instance, it can be traced that this area of woodland was exploited, but also newly planted (Whaley 2006 : xxix). Wooded areas are also referenced in two other names, namely Firbank and Natland.

However, some names also refer explicitly to the flora of the area. For instance, the ON element **askr** in Askham refers to ash trees. Contrary to what one might believe when looking at the modern form, Askham does not contain the OE element **hām**. Askham is a simplex name and the last syllable of the modern form is due to the presence of the dative plural inflectional ending, which gives **askum** (Mills 2011). After a geological analysis of the area where Askham is located, it is apparent that the ground is optimal for ash trees. In particular, the superficial deposits of the area consist of till, on top of which fertile soil develops

and drains well (Murphy 2022: 286), which is the preferred environment for ash trees to thrive (Woodland Trust, n.d.). Notably, the ash tree was believed to possess medicinal as well as magical properties, but it is also known for its value as timber (ibid.). In light of the ON origin of the name, it may also be useful to consider that the ash tree plays a significant role in Norse mythology, since the tree of life, Yggdrasil, is described as an ash. Other noteworthy names that refer to the vegetation in the landscape are Selside, as the specific **selja** refers to willow trees, and Natland, which might contain the otherwise not attested element ***nata**, for 'nettle'.

There are also names referring to the local fauna present in the corpus. Indeed, Ravenstonedale could denote that ravens favour the valley. However, it is also possible that the name derives from the mythical 'raven stone', which was said to have been brought from the sea by a bird to its nest, and also believed to possess mystical talismanic powers (Ratcliffe 1997, cited in Moore 2002: 29). A second name that also contains a reference to ravens is Crosby Ravensworth, where the ON personal name *Rafnsvartr* in the manorial affix can be linked to the bird. Indeed, this name is unusual, as elements referring to ravens usually compound with elements denoting topographical features (ibid.). Notably, the OE specific **truht** in Troutbeck also refers to wildlife, as it describes a stream that trout inhabit.

The simplex name Shap is interesting, as the OE element **heap** means 'the heap of stones'. This is generally believed to refer to the remains of an ancient stone circle, of which there are three in the area close to Shap. The name suggests that the stone circle in question was already in a derelict state when the name was given, which was likely before it was first documented in 1190. This may be linked to the common practice of using such monuments as a resource for stone to use in construction.

Habitative Names

As noted in the introduction, place-names can be very informative regarding the lives of early settlers and how they interacted with the landscape. For instance, the numerous occurrences of the OE element **tūn**, which generally describes a farmstead and occurs all over England,

suggest that farming was a predominant industry in this area, as it was elsewhere. Notably, names referring to farms and homesteads in this corpus seem to be remarkably consistent with relation to the underlying geological deposits. Interestingly, names containing the elements **tūn**, **bȳ**, which is the ON equivalent for 'farmstead', as well as **hām**, 'homestead' – namely Bampton, Bolton, Barton, Clifton, Helsington, New Hutton, Old Hutton, Orton, Preston Patrick, Brougham, and Crosby Ravensworth – all seem to be situated on top of, or immediately next to, areas where the superficial deposits are made up of clay, silt, sand, and gravel. Appropriately, it has been found that medium-sized gravel islands are attractive with respect to agricultural activities (Gelling 2010: 225). Further, most of the listed names are also in proximity to areas where glacial till, on top of which fertile soil has developed (Murphy 2022: 286), is predominant. In the case of Thrimby, the village is located on a larger area of underground till. In contrast, Helsington seems to be located in an area where the superficial deposit is peat, which is formed in wetland and has been shown to minimize flooding risk (Kopp, O.C. 2023). This is noteworthy since Helsington lies just north of the confluence of the rivers Pool and Gilpin and is thus framed by water on three sides. However, the moisture-holding properties of peat may also be useful with regard to agriculture.

Interestingly, there is no noticeable difference between the superficial deposits of farmsteads containing the ON **bȳ** and those containing the OE **tūn**, even though research suggests that when the Scandinavian settlers arrived, all the land best suited for agriculture had already been occupied by the existing inhabitants, and they thus either had to settle for less fertile ground, or land less inviting for other reasons (Gelling, 2010: 225). However, one may be able to draw different conclusions by having a closer look at the distribution of the names containing the OE or ON elements. Indeed, by examining the distribution of names containing **bȳ** and **tūn,** it can be observed that they seem to appear in clusters. Interestingly, names containing **tūn** are grouped together in the North and in the South of the chosen area. In both clusters, the names appear in groups of four. Notably, Orton, which is located centrally, stands alone. There are only two names containing **bȳ** within this corpus, however, they also

appear in a group between the cluster of **tūn**-names in the North and the centrally located Orton.
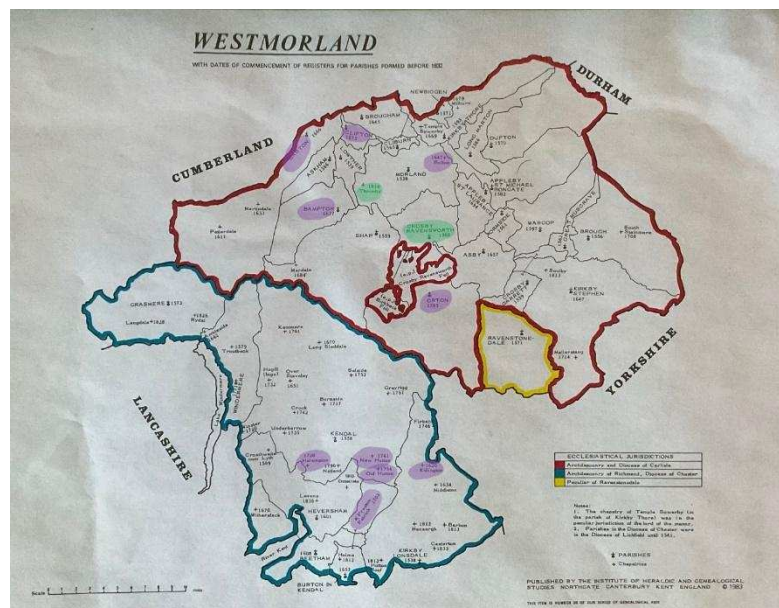

*Figure 3: Distribution of names containing the elements **tūn** (purple) and **bȳ** (green)*

If one examines the geographical situation of the **bȳ-**names, Thrimby and Crosby Ravensworth, in comparison to the **tūn-**names, a pattern can be observed as regards the surrounding landscape of the places. In particular, the areas where **bȳ-**names are located seem to be in close proximity to watercourses, as well as steep hillslopes – geographical circumstances that are not optimal, especially in view of possible flooding of the watercourses. This is illustrated in the map of Thrimby below, where contour lines highlight the terrain. By contrast, names with **tūn** are generally situated in broader valleys, which provide more space, as illustrated using the example of Helsington.
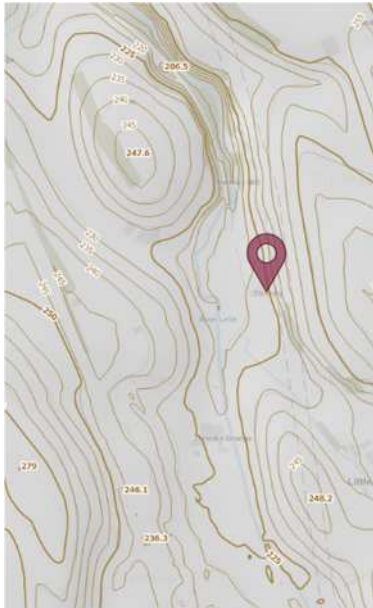
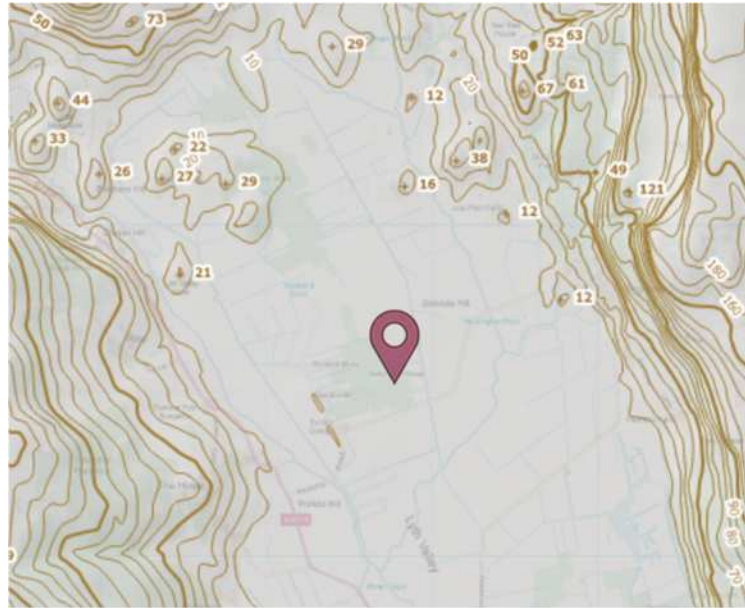*Figure 4: Geographical situation of Thrimby*

Figure 5: Geographical situation of Helsington

The fact that both names containing **bȳ** are ON compounds, combined with their geographically suboptimal location, thus could indicate that these places were named by Scandinavian settlers.

The element **hām** only occurs once in the corpus, in Brougham, as it is uncommon in the North West. Distribution patterns of this element suggest that it can be attributed to the earlier period of English settlement and fell out of use as a place name as settlers moved westwards (Smith 1956: 227). It is generally believed that the specific in Brougham is a metathesised form of OE **burh**, which denotes the proximity of the Roman fortification *Brocavum.* The meaning of this Brittonic name is unclear, but it may be traced back to an early holder *Brociācus* (c.618) (PN We 2: 127).

References to the cultivation of land can be found in several names within the corpus. For instance, Rydal refers to a 'valley where rye is grown'. Notably, Rydal is a hybrid with the ON element denoting the landscape feature 'valley' and the OE specific denoting the plant used for cultivation. Indeed, a geological analysis of the location shows that the superficial deposits are generally favourable for agriculture.

Ambleside and Selside, which both contain the ON element **sǽtr**, seem to refer to animal husbandry, since the element means 'shieling or summer pasture'. Of note, this lexical item is a distinctive feature of Norwegian vocabulary (Cameron 1996: 78).

Personal Names and Group Names

The personal names that are present in the place-names of this corpus are largely of ON origin, with the exception of three. Martindale was likely named for the chapel of St Martin, however, it could also be traced back to the OE personal name *Martin*, a man who could have lived there before the church was built, rather than the saint's name (PN We 1: 215). The same is the case for Patterdale, the specific of which could be traced back to the Old Irish personal name *Patric*. Interestingly, the earliest attestation of this name shows evidence of an Old English inflectional ending with the strong masculine ending '-*es'* in *Patrichesdale* c. 1180. The third place-name in this corpus that contains a personal name that is not of ON origin is Killington. Indeed, Killington is an example for how place-names help preserve personal names, as the Old English name *Cylla* is recurrent in place-names but is not independently recorded elsewhere (PN We 2: 40). *Cylla* is a monothematic name ending in a final vowel. Notably, the personal name is followed by the connective particle '-*ing',* which clarifies that the farmstead, denoted by the generic **tūn**, is associated with Cylla. Another example of a place-name that potentially preserves a personal name not attested elsewhere is Natland, which may contain the Old Norse personal name *Nati'. Interestingly, it has been found that Nati appears in the Edda as a mythological name of a jǫtunn, or giant, which could be a possible origin. This connection is further supported by the fact that the element **lundr** can also mean 'sacred grove' and is sometimes found in place-names in combination with the name of a Norse god (Smith 2010: 27).

Personal names in this corpus compound with both topographical and habitative generics. Interestingly, compounds with topographical generics are slightly more frequent, for instance in Martindale, Patterdale, Natland and Windermere. Notably, the genitive ending *-ar,* which denotes possession*,* is present in Windermere. The earlier spelling *Winandermere* c.

1210 suggests that the name was subject to phonological change. As the second syllable *-an* is unstressed, it was lost over time. By contrast, compounds with habitative generics can be observed in the place-names Killington, Crosscrake, and Helsington. Crosscrake, 'Kraki's cross' contains the ON personal name Kraki. Interestingly, this name is an inversion compound of the two elements, which means that the order of elements is reversed – following Brittonic naming practices, in which the stress typically falls on the second element (Cameron 1996: 78). Notably, inversion compounds are a unique characteristic of the place-names of North West England and do not occur anywhere else within the Danelaw (ibid.).

A name that potentially refers to a group is Helsington, if the first element stands for *helsingas* 'those dwelling on the hals'. By 'hals', usually a neck of land or a pass is denoted, which is plausible given the geography (PN We 1: 108). However, the phonology in the first element is often found to be improbable (ibid.). Alternatively, the name might also refer to OE **hæsling,** 'hazel copse'.

Conclusion

As this paper has aimed to demonstrate, the study of place-names – bringing together in an interdisciplinary approach fields such as geology, history, ancestry, archaeology, and linguistics – offers an invaluable perspective on the historical study both of Westmorland and of Britain more widely. Vocabulary fossilised in place-names that would otherwise be lost can tell us a great deal about people who lived hundreds of years ago, their perceptions of and interactions with the landscape, inter-community dynamics, as well as preserving the memory of names not otherwise recorded, such as *Cylla*. Furthermore, vocabulary from languages that are poorly attested or no longer spoken, such as Brittonic, is also preserved in place-names. Although the corpus of names analysed in this paper only covers part of Westmorland, it tells us a lot about the historical landscape and unique language influences in the area. Lastly, it becomes apparent how long-forgotten senses of place and ways of life may be recovered through the study of place-names.

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Illustrations

All maps throughout this work, except for Figure 3 (seminar material), were created using EDINA Digimap (https://digimap.edina.ac.uk).

Appendix

All names are taken from Mills unless indicated otherwise.

Ambleside – Cumbria. *Ameleseta c.*1095. 'Shieling or summer pasture by the river sandbank'. OScand. *á + melr + sǽtr.*

Askham – Cumbria. *Askum* 1232. '(Place at) the ash-trees'. OScand. *askr* in the dative plural form *askum.*

Bampton – Cumbria. *Bampton* c. 1160. Usually 'farmstead made of beams or by a tree', OE *bēam + tūn.*

Barton – Cumbria. *Bartun, -ton(a)* c. 1184. 'outlying grange', *v.* OE *b*ere-tūn. (EPNS)

Bolton – Cumbria. *Botelton* c.1200. 'enclosure with buildings', 'the village proper'. *v.* OE *bōðl-tūn.* (EPNS)

Brougham – Cumbria. *Bruham* 1130. 'homestead near the fortification' *v.* OE *burh , hām* (EPNS)

Cliburn – Cumbria. *Clibbrun c.*1140. 'Stream by the cliff or bank'. OE *clif + burna.*

Clifton – Cumbria. *Clifton* 1204. a common place name, 'farmstead on or near a cliff or bank', OE *clif + tūn.*

Crook – Cumbria. *Croke* 12th cent. OScand. *krókr* or OE **crōc* 'land in a bend, secluded corner of land'.

Crosby Ravensworth – Cumbria. *Crosseby Raveneswart* 12th cent. usually 'village where there are crosses'. from OScand. *krossa-bý.* Manorial affix from the OScand. pers. name *Rafnsvartr.*

Crosscrake – Cumbria. *Croscrake, Croscrak(e)* 1275-9. 'Kraki's cross', an inversion compound of *cros* and the ON pers.n. *Kraki.* (EPNS)

Firbank – Cumbria. *Frebanc* 1215-1254. 'woodland bank', v. ON fyrhðe, banke. (EPNS)

Grasmere – Cumbria. *Gressemere* 1245. Probably 'mere called grass lake'. OE *gres + sǣ* 'lake' with explanatory *mere.*

Helsington – Cumbria. *Helsingtune* 1086 (DB). 'farmstead of those dwelling on the hals'. *v. hals, -ingas , tūn.* (EPNS)

Hugill – Cumbria. *Hogail(l), -gayl* 1256. 'the high ravine', from ON *hór* , a variant of ON *hár* and *geil* 'ravine' (EPNS)

Hutton, Old – Cumbria. *Hotun, Hoton* 1086 (DB). 'Farmstead on the hill or spur of land', *v. hōh tūn* ; 'Old' (*v.* **ald** , Lat *vetus*) to distinguish it from New Hutton. (EPNS)

Hutton, New – Cumbria. *Hoton* 1274. *v.* Old Hutton, from which it is distinguished as 'New' (*v.* **nīwe** , Lat *nova*), and 'in the Hay', for which *v.* Hayclose. (EPNS)

Kendal – Cumbria. *Cherchebi* 1086 (*db*), *Kircabikendala c.*1095, *Kendale* 1452. 'Village with a church in the valley of the River Kent'. Originally OScand. *kirkju-bý* with the addition of a district name (Celtic river-name of uncertain meaning + OScand. *dalr*) which now alone survives.

Kentmere – Cumbria. *Kentemere 13th cent. 'Pool by the River Kent'. Celtic river-name (of uncertain meaning) + OE mere.*

Killington – Cumbria. *Killington(a)* 1175. 'Farmstead associated with Cylla', *v.* OE *-ing , tūn*. (PN We)

Langdale, Little – Cumbria. *Langedenelittle c.*1160. 'Long valley'. OE *lang* + *denu* (replaced by OScand. *dalr*), with *lȳtel* 'little'.

Longsleddale – *Cumbria. Sleddal(e), -all c.1229.* **Long Sleddale c.1518–29** *v. slæd 'valley', to which dalr has been added tautologically. The valley is the long deep valley of the Sprint. For the affix v. lang 'long'. (PN We)*

Lowther – Cumbria. *Lauder c.*1175. Named from the River Lowther, possibly an OScand. river-name meaning 'foamy river', OScand. *lauthr* + *á*, but perhaps Celtic in origin.

Mardale – Cumbria. *Merdale* 1278. 'lake valley' *v.* OE *mere, dæl.* (PN We)

Martindale – Cumbria. *Martindale c.*1220-47. 'Martin's valley' *v. dæl* (dalr). (PN We)

Morland – Cumbria. *Morlund c.*1140. 'Grove in the moor or marsh'. OScand. *mór* + *lundr*.

Natland – Cumbria. *Natalund c.*1175. 'Grove where nettles grow, or of a man called *Nati'. OScand. *nata* or pers. name + *lundr*.

Orton – Cumbria. *Overton* 1239. usually 'higher farmstead', or 'farmstead by a ridge or bank', OE *uferra* or **ofer* or *ōfer* + *tūn.*

Patterdale – Cumbria. *Patrichesdale c.*1180. 'Valley of a man called Patric'. OIrish pers. name + OScand. *dalr*.

Preston Patrick – Cumbria. *Prestun, Preston(a)* 1086 (DB). The priests' farmstead', *v.* prēost , tūn . (PN We)

Ravenstonedale – Cumbria. *Rauenstandale* 12th cent. 'Valley of the raven stone'. OE *hræfn* + *stān* + OScand. *dalr*.

Rydal – Cumbria. *Ridale* 1240. 'Valley where rye is grown'. OE *ryge* + OScand. *dalr*.

Selside – *Cumbria. Selside 1443. 'Shieling near the willows', v. ON selja, sǽtr. (PN We)*

Shap – Cumbria. *Hep* c. 1190. 'The heap of stones' (referring to an ancient stone circle). OE *hēap*.

Staveley, Over – Cumbria. *Staveley(e)* c.1341. 'wood or glade where the staves were got', *v. stæf* (gen.pl. *stafa*), *lēah*. (PN We)

Thrimby – Cumbria. *Trnebi* 1200. 'farmstead near a thorn-tree', *v.* ON *þyrnir, bȳ* (PN We)

Troutbeck – Cumbria. *Trutebek* 1272. '(place on) the trout stream', OE *truht* + OScand. *bekkr.*

Underbarrow – Cumbria. *Underbarroe* 1517. '(Place) under the hill'. OE *under* + *beorg.*

Windermere – Cumbria. *Winandermere* 12th cent. 'Lake of a man called Vinandr'. OScand. pers. name (genitive *-ar*) + OE *mere.*

Winster – Cumbria. *Winster* 13th cent. Named from the River Winster, a Celtic river-name meaning 'white stream' or an OScand. river-name meaning 'the left one'.