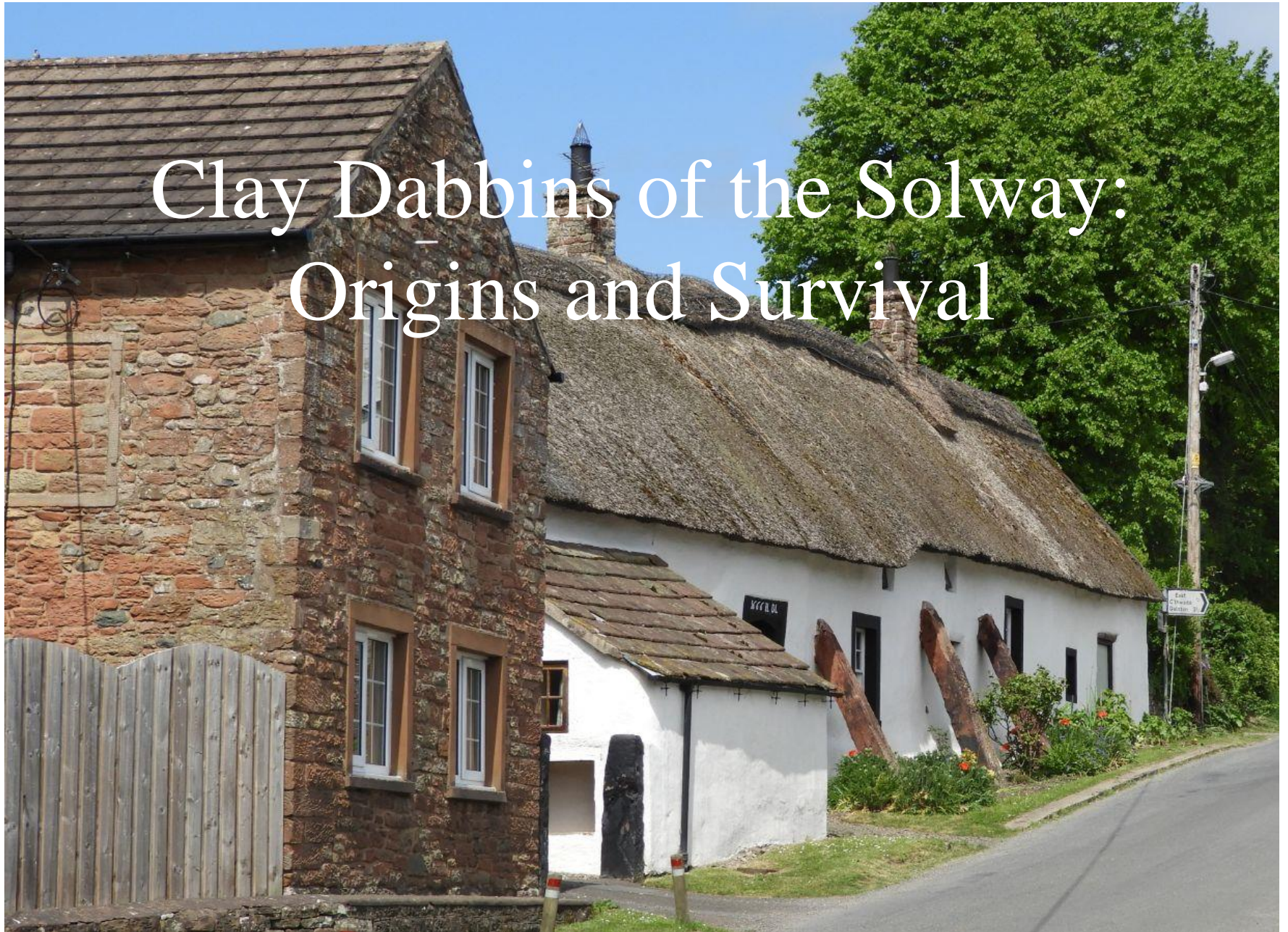


# Clay Dabbins of the Solway: Origins and Survival



# Clay Dabbins of the Solway: Origins and Survival

Peter Messenger

A brief introduction to the clay  
dabbins of the Solway:  
now are a rare survival of the  
region's vernacular architecture.

What is a clay dabbin or daubin?

-a house, cottage or other structure built of earth mixed with straw and water.

This traditional form was once common  
throughout the region  
– on both sides of the border.

The first clear references to these buildings can be found in Thomas Denton's 'Perambulation' of the region in 1688 :

*'the houses in all the countrey roundabout Carlisle are made of clay'*

*and*

*'most of the houses' in Wigton were 'walled with clay.'*

A traditional form of construction – but  
how were they built?  
Views have differed over time.

The earliest academic reference to clay dabbin construction came in 1929.

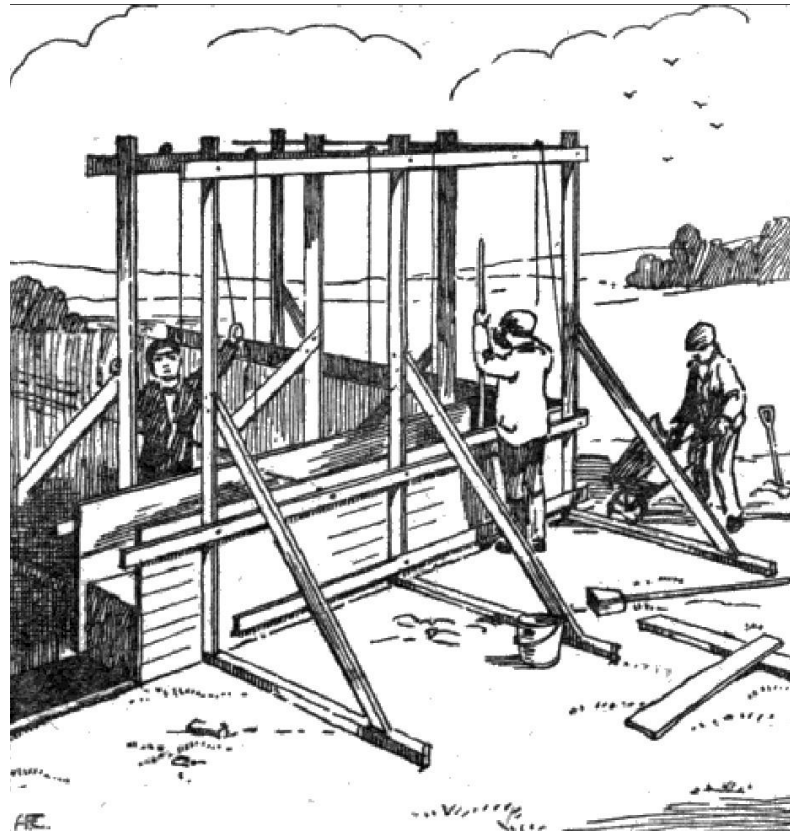


W. G. Collingwood has described how such a house was built<sup>9</sup>: —

“Where stone was not easily obtainable, a rough casing of boards was set up and into this was poured the clay in a semi-fluid state, layers of straw cut to the required length being laid on the wall every few inches . . . the floor was usually of clay, beaten almost to the consistency of stone by the constant passage of feet, flags being necessary only for the threshold and the hearth. The only mason-work required was in the jambs and lintels of the doors and windows.”

*Grainger & Collingwood, The Register and Records of Holm Cultram, 1929, p. 240.*

This description suggests that the method of construction was akin to what is termed *Pisé de Terre* or Rammed Earth.



If Collingwood and Grainger had examined other documents they would have found locally written descriptions of just what a 'daubin' meant.

The word referred to :

- a method of construction;
- the material it was made of;
- and a building made of this material.;

In 1794, Hutchinson describes clay houses in the parish of Orton in Cumberland as:

‘generally made up in a day or two: for, when a person wants a house or a barn, etc. He acquaints his neighbours who will appear at the time appointed: some lay on clay, some tread it, while others are preparing straw to mix with it. By this means, building comes low and expeditious, and indeed it must be owned that they have brought the art of clay building to some perfection. They generally ground with stone above a yard high: and a house thus built will stand (it is said) 150 or 200 years.

Hutchinson , History of the County of Cumberland, 1794, 515.

The method used at Dornock in Dumfriesshire was described as follows:

They first dig out a foundation trench in which ‘a row or two of stones’ can be laid.

‘then they procure, from a pit contiguous, as much clay or brick earth as is sufficient to form the walls, and having provided a quantity of straw or other litter to mix with the clay, upon a day appointed, the whole neighbourhood, male and female, .... Assemble, each with a dung-fork, a spade or some such instrument.

Some fall to working the clay or mud by mixing it with straw;

Others carry the materials

And four or six of the most experienced hands build. And take care of the walls.

In this manner the walls of the house are finished in a few hours. ‘

*Sir J Sinclair, The First Statistical Account of Scotland, 1792, 2.*

The end of the Dumfriesshire account ends with:

‘after [the building work is finished] they retire to a good dinner and plenty of drink which is provided for them, where they have music and a dance, with which they conclude their evening.’

‘This they call a daubing.’

So we have a fourth meaning .

This is confirmed by Robert Anderson’s poem The Clay Daubin-

From the first verse it doesn’t sound as if they had been doing much building  
(with eatin, and drinkin, and dancing as well as fratchin, and feightin and aw)

But verse two does say that

‘The waws were aw finish’d er darkin’

The first attempt to study a clay dabbin as a building type of significance was in 1953, at Burgh by Sands.

This was a study of Lamonby Farm and had been suggested to the authors by Ronald Brunskill who was just beginning his examination of the vernacular buildings of Cumberland.

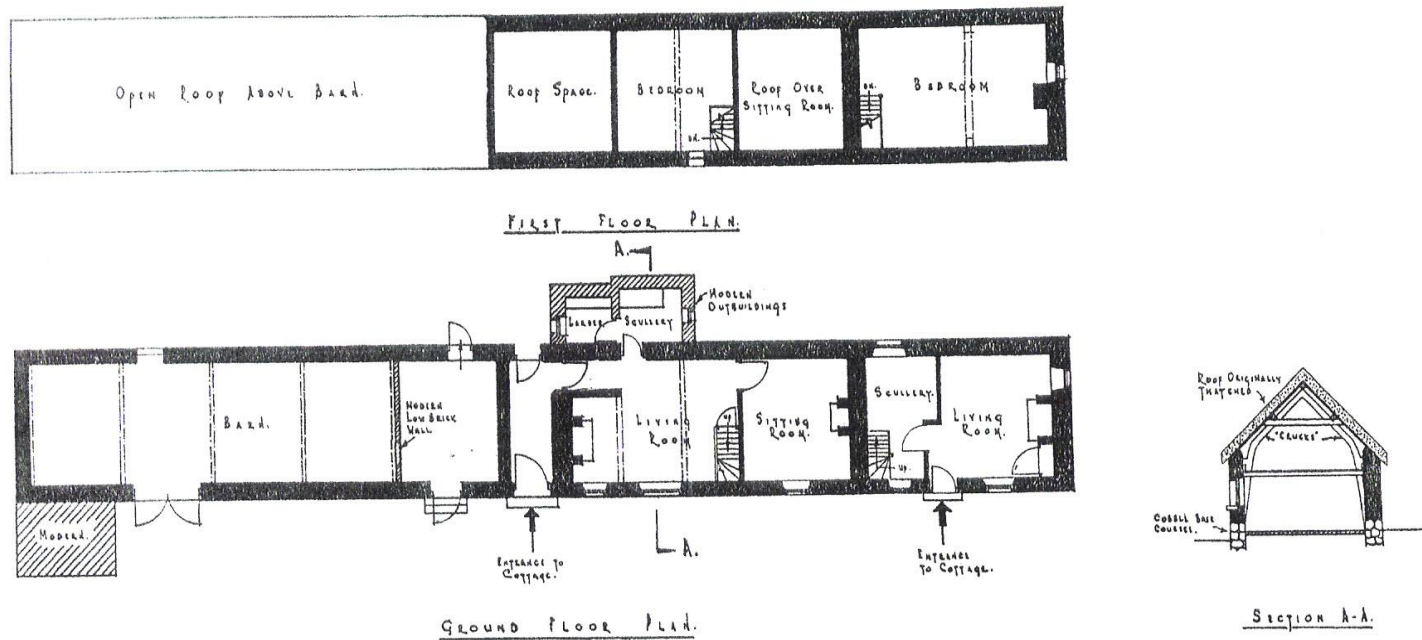
Now the terms *clay house* and *clay daubin* are often used as though they were synonymous, but the latter really describes a rather different and more primitive structure. The real clay daubin was made by first putting up a framework of lathes, or springy rods, woven together, and then plastering them over with clay, often mixed with cow-dung or lime plaster. Such buildings could not carry a proper roof, and were often of a beehive shape.<sup>7</sup> It is houses of this kind, true clay daubins, that Celia Fiennes, Stukeley and Hutchinson describe as “hovels” or as “mean beyond imagination”. But where stone was easily obtainable—in the Lake District—an alternative form of building, with dry stone walls, seems to have been in use. This latter type is probably repre-





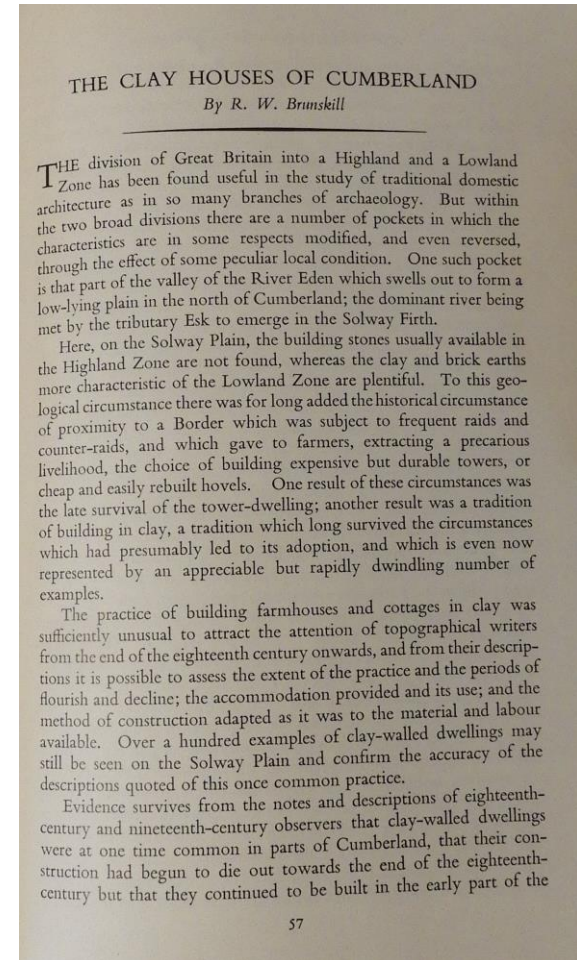
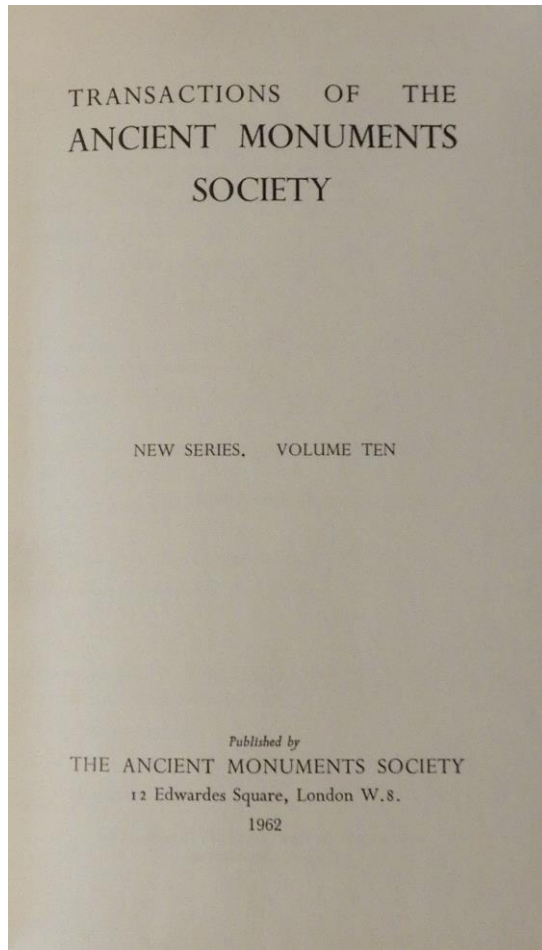
Lamonby Farm, Burgh by Sands 1953

# Lamonby Farm Survey 1953



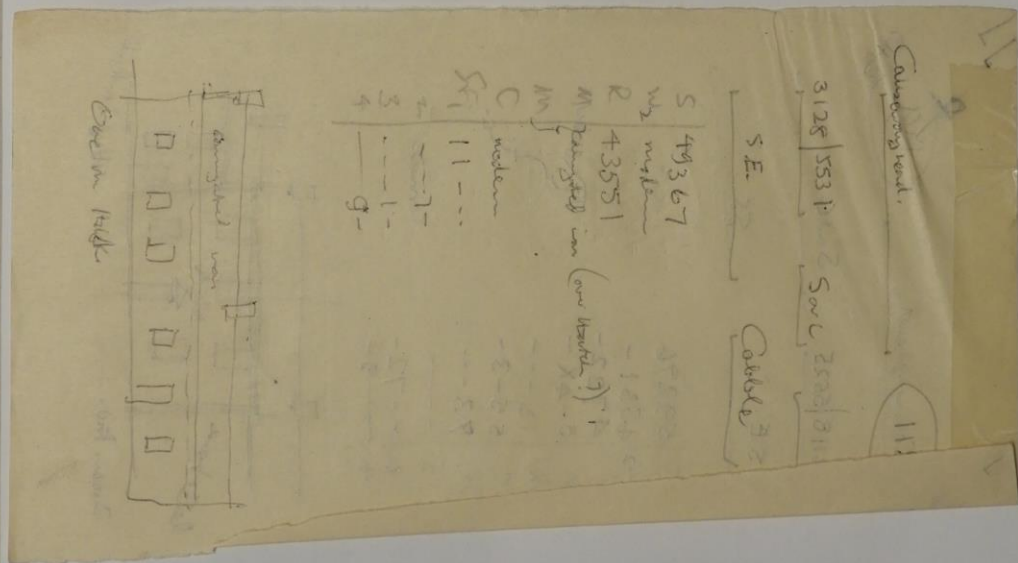
Plan 5: Lamonby Farm and Cottage, Burgh-by-Sands (Site 043), after Hodgson *et al* (1953, Fig 5)

# R W Brunskill The Clay Houses of Cumberland TAMS, X, 1962



LOCATION				COUNTY				MAP REFERENCE				FILING			
HOLME LOW				CUMBERLAND				3128 - 5531				12			
ADDRESS				ASPECT				WALLING MATERIAL				DATE			
Causeway head,				S.E.				Clay and cobble							
WALL	ADMIX.	WINDOWS	WINDOWS	ROOF	MATERIALS	M. M.	CHIMNEYS	DORMERS	S.F. 1	S.F. 2	S.F. 3	S.F. 4			
49367			modern	43551	cal. and tuff		modern		11	---	---	7- ---	---	---	9-
REMARKS :-						PHOTOGRAPH									
SURVEYOR		DATE		PHOTOGRAPH No		/OVER									
RWB		April 56 e April 61.		### 48 and 80 112.											

RECORD CARD 1956



FIELD NOTES 1956

Causeway head.

112

3128 | 553 P.      Saw 2522 | 811

S.E.

Cobble

S 49367

W<sub>2</sub> modern

R 43551

M <sup>reworked in (over 1000?)</sup>

M

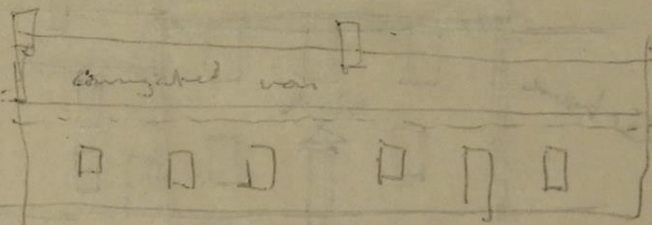
C modern

S<sub>1</sub> 11 ---

2 --- 7-


3 --- 1-

4 --- 9-

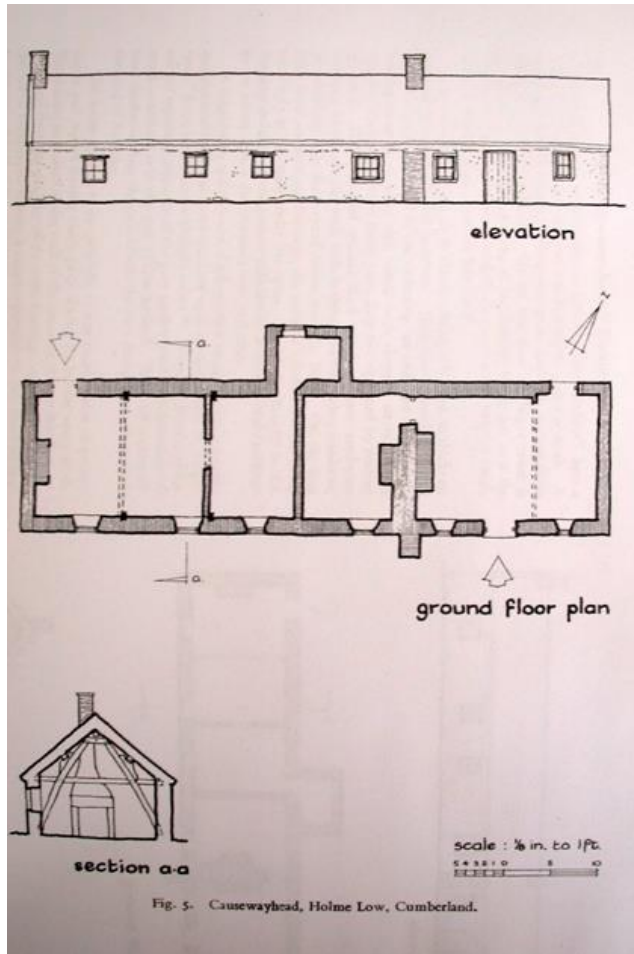


Over in Halko

FIELD NOTES 1956

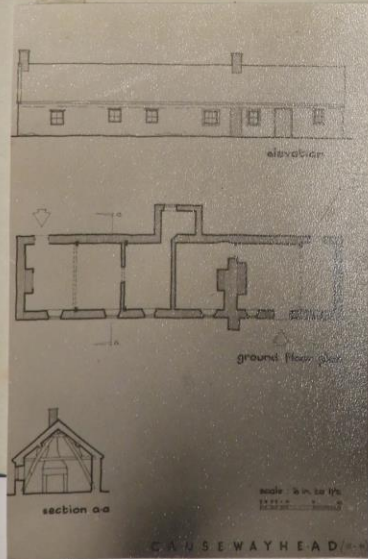
LOCATION		COUNTY		MAP REFERENCE				FILING				
HOLME LOW		CUMBERLAND		3128 - 5531				10e				
ADDRESS		ASPECT		WALLING MATERIAL				DATE				
Causeway head,		S.E		Clay and cobble								
WALL	ADMIX.	WINDOWS	WINDOWS	ROOF	MATERIALS	M. M.	CHIMNEYS	DORMERS	S.F. 1	S.F. 2	S.F. 3	S.F. 4
49367			modern	43551	CGI. and tatch		modern		11 ---	---7-	---1-	---9-
REMARKS :—						PHOTOGRAPH						
												
												/ OVER
SURVEYOR		DATE		PHOTOGRAPH No								
RWB		April 56 e April 61.		<del>##</del> 48 and see 118.								

RECORD CARD 1956



Briar Park, Causewayhead ,  
Surveyed by RW Brunskill

2<sup>nd</sup> visit 1961



~~CLAY-WALLED COZZAGE~~  
Causewayhead 188

CAUSEWAYHEAD, Holme Law, C.  
under demolition, 1961





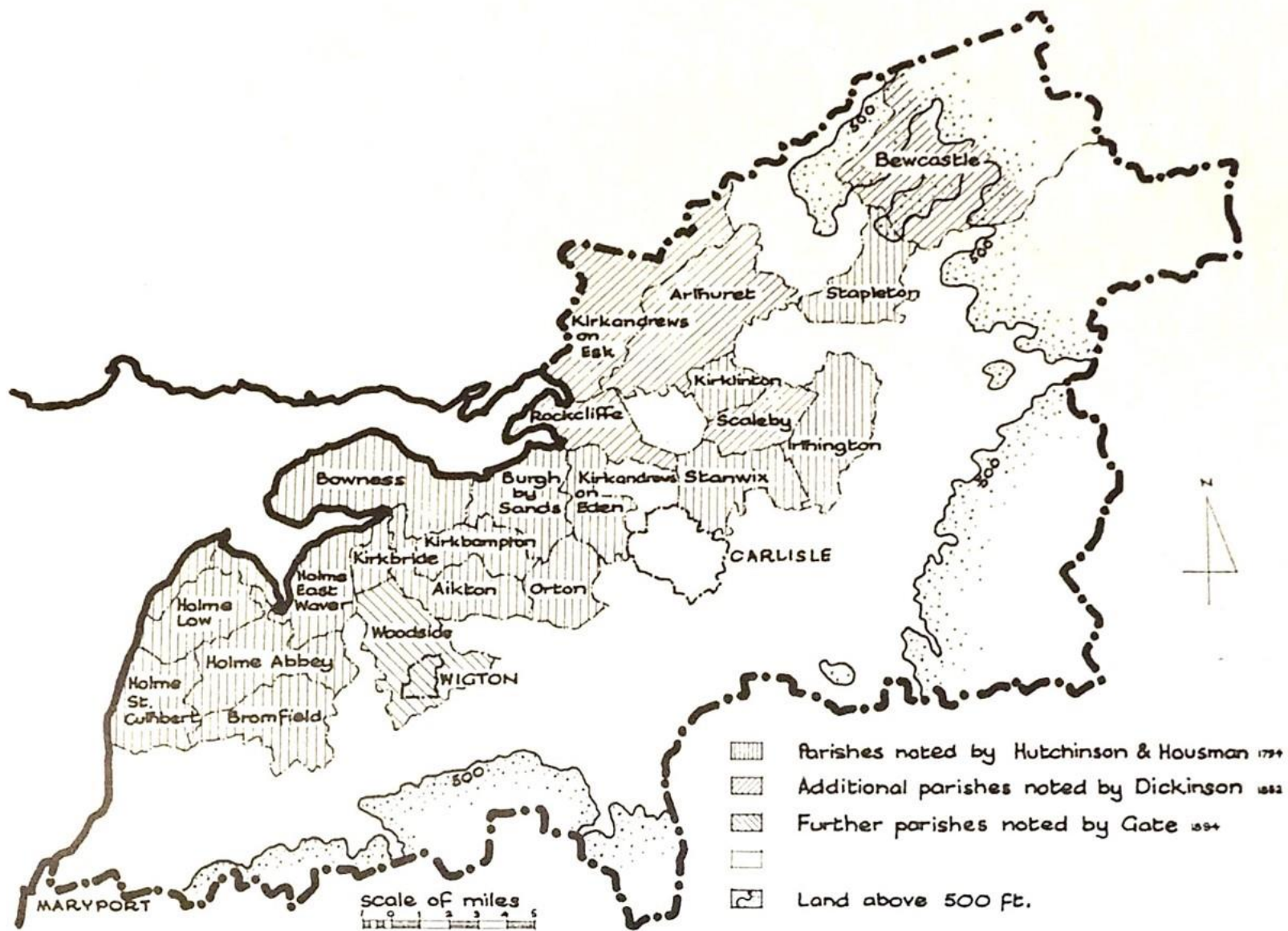


FIG. 1.

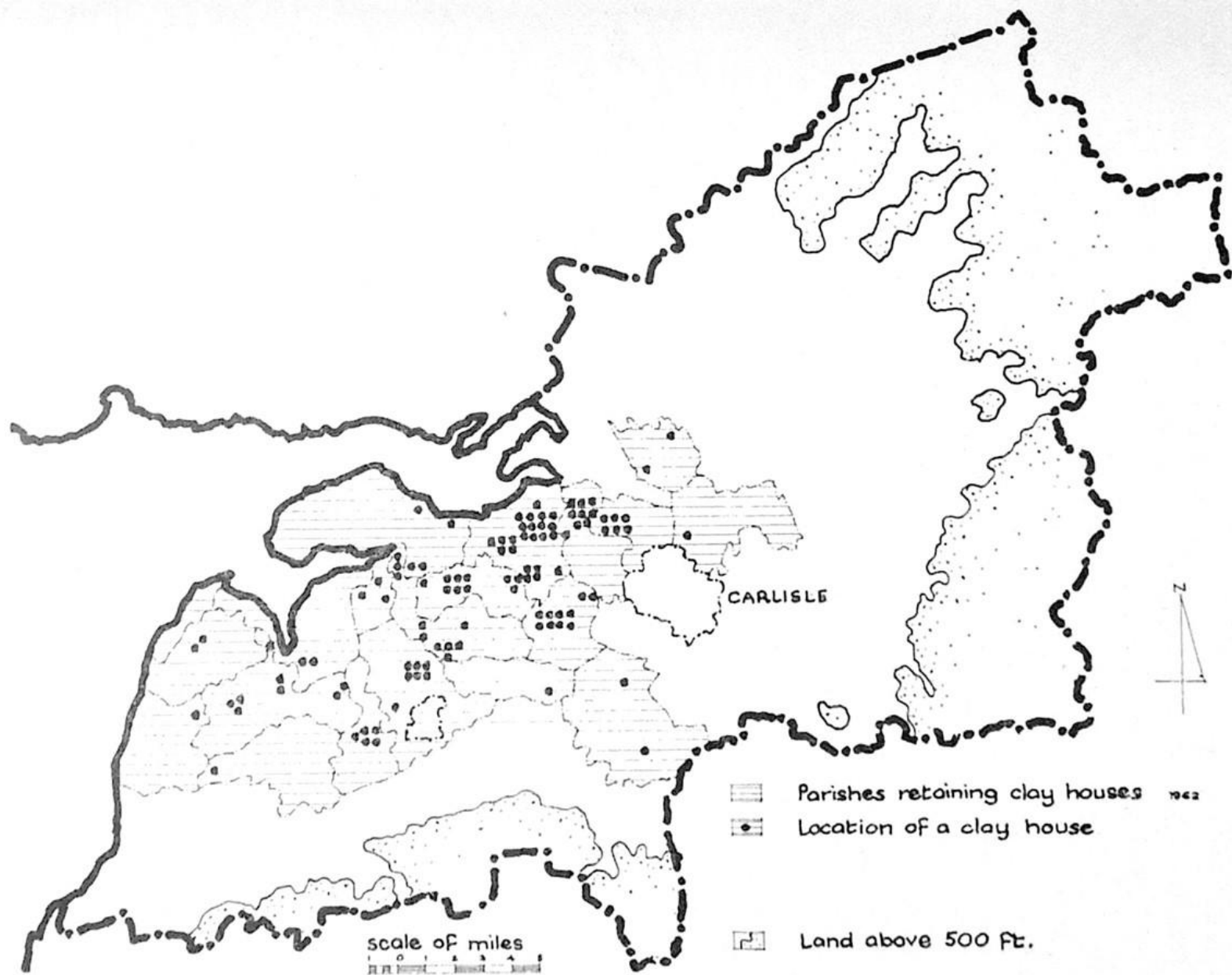


FIG. 2.





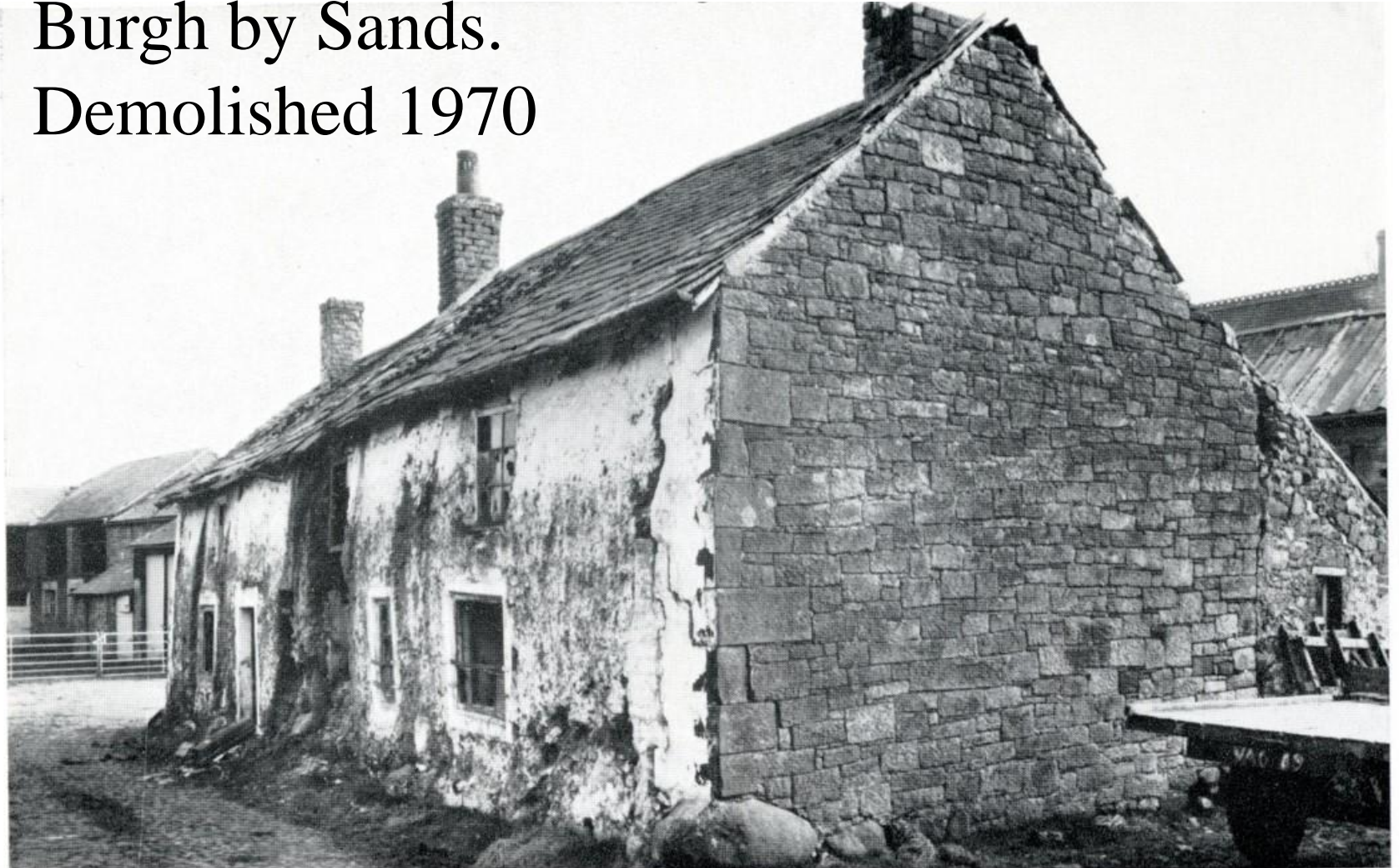


ART. XI.—*Paddock Hole : A Cumberland house with  
a lower-end parlour.* By PHILIP DIXON.

*Read at Hexham, July 15th, 1971.*

THE old house which stood in the yard of Burgh Head farm (NY 328591), immediately to the south of Burgh-by-Sands Church, had been empty for some years and was demolished in September 1970.<sup>1</sup> This article is divided into four parts: in parts 1 and 2 the house and its history are described; in part 3 it is shown that the house was built in 1707 and that the room at the passage-end was, most unusually, the parlour, and in part 4 the structural changes are analysed in detail.

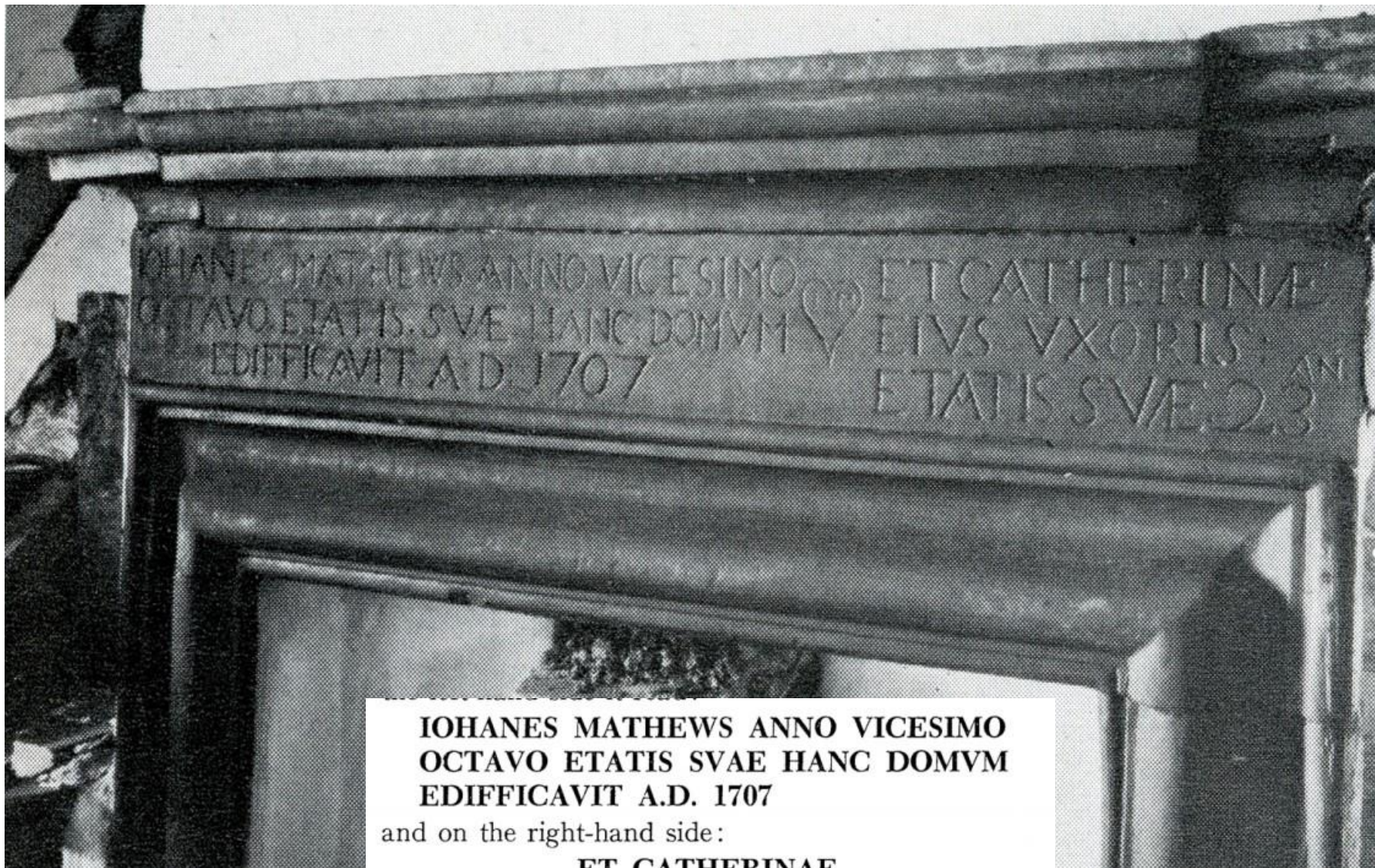
Paddock Hole,  
Burgh by Sands.  
Demolished 1970





IOHANNES MATHEWS ANNO VICESIMO OCTAVO  
OCTAVO ETATIS SVE HANC DOMVM EDIFICAVIT A. D. 1707

ET CATHERINE  
EIVS VXORIS AN  
ETATIS SVE 23



**IOHANES MATHEWS ANNO VICESIMO  
OCTAVO ETATIS SVAE HANC DOMVM  
EDIFFICAVIT A.D. 1707**

and on the right-hand side:

**ET CATHERINAE  
EIVS VXORIS: AN  
ETATIS SVAE 23.**

JOHN MATHEWS IN HIS 28<sup>TH</sup> YEAR BUILT THIS HOUSE

AD 1707

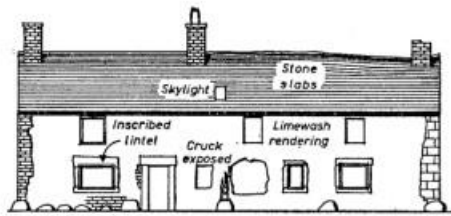
AND CATHERINE HIS WIFE IN HER 23<sup>RD</sup> YEAR

JOHN MATHEWS IN HIS 28<sup>TH</sup> YEAR BUILT THIS HOUSE

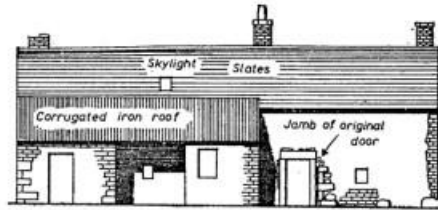
AD 1707

AND CATHERINE HIS WIFE IN HER 23<sup>RD</sup> YEAR

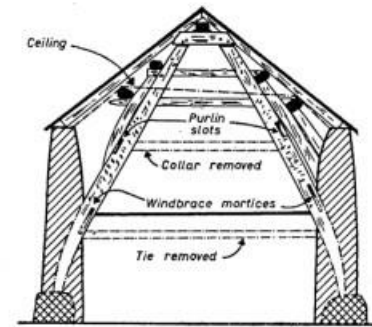
The Mathews family held customary tenement No.9, which was 'Padock(sic) hole', in 1635. The annual customary rent (Lord's Rent) was 19s. 8d with an arbitrary fine of £8 8s. based on its improved valuation. The Rev. Richard Matthews inherited the tenancy in 1799 and enfranchised his customary tenement in 1807.



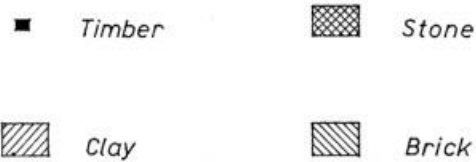
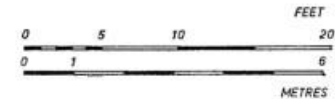
NORTH ELEVATION



SOUTH ELEVATION



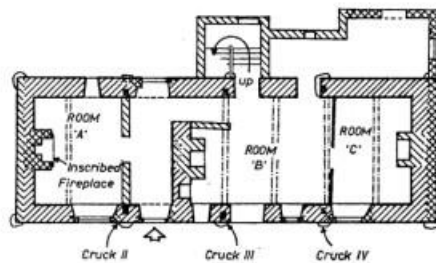
CRUCK II FROM EAST



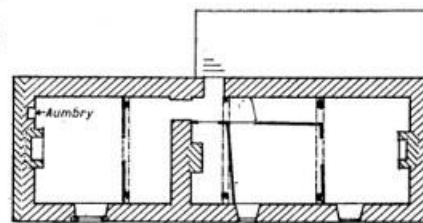
Moulding of fireplace jamb in Room 'A'



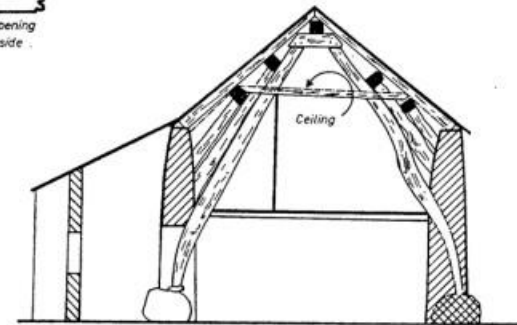
Fire opening this side



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



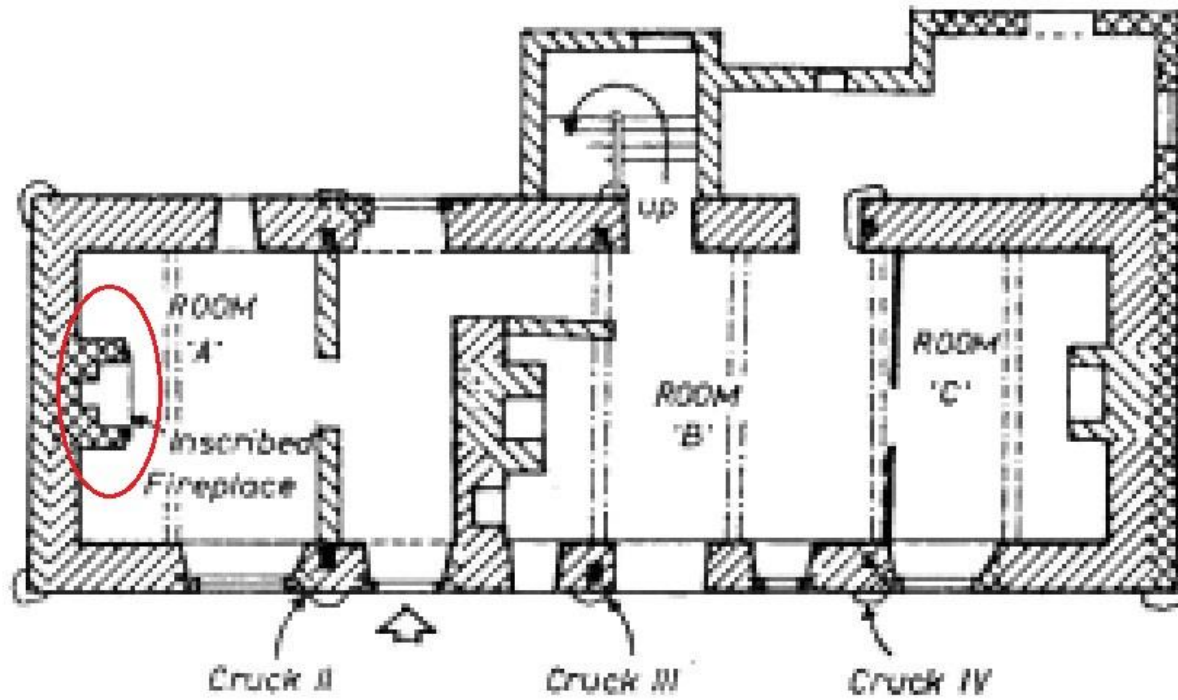
CRUCK IV FROM EAST

PADDOCK HOLE

BURGH BY SANDS

CUMBERLAND

FEET



GROUND FLOOR PLAN







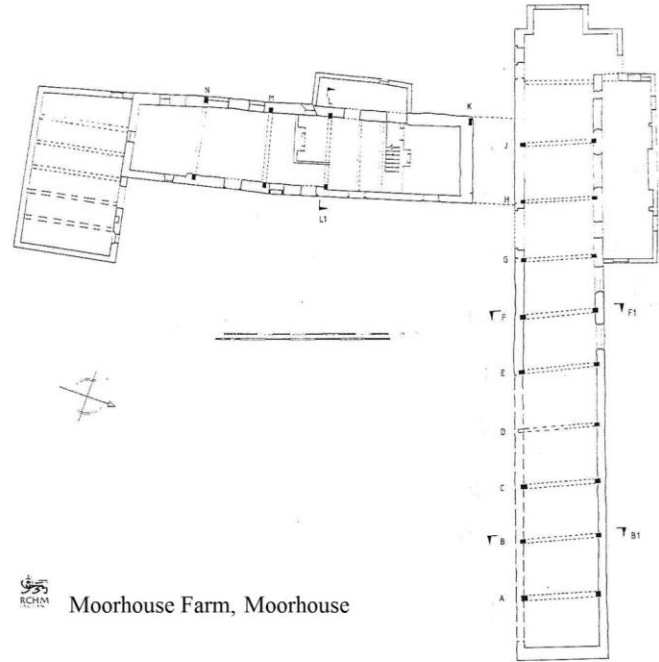
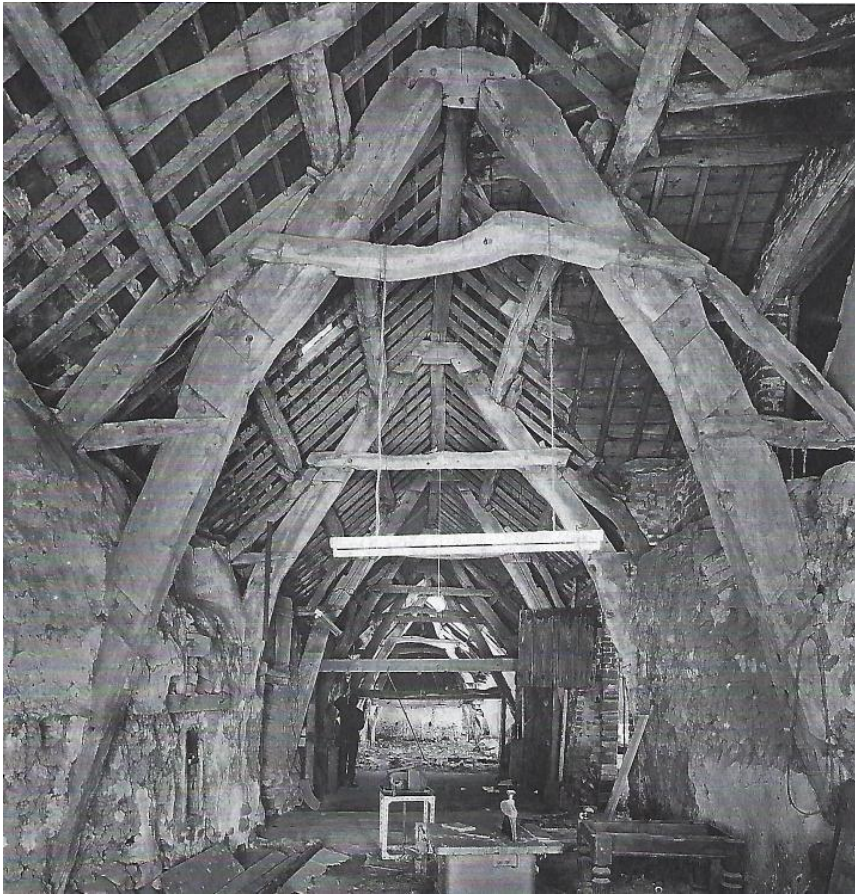


# CLAY DABBINS

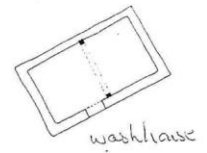
VERNACULAR BUILDINGS  
OF THE SOLWAY PLAIN

by  
NINA JENNINGS

# The Barn at Moorhouse Farm, Moorhouse



 Moorhouse Farm, Moorhouse









Lamonby Farm had received a considerable amount of academic attention and this raised its profile.

By the early 1990s Lamonby Farm's barn was also in need of urgent repairs which meant that the listed building was considered to be 'At Risk'.

















# CLAY BUILDINGS ON THE CUMBRIA SOLWAY PLAIN, EXTENSIVE SURVEY

## Summary of Results



Oxford Archaeology North

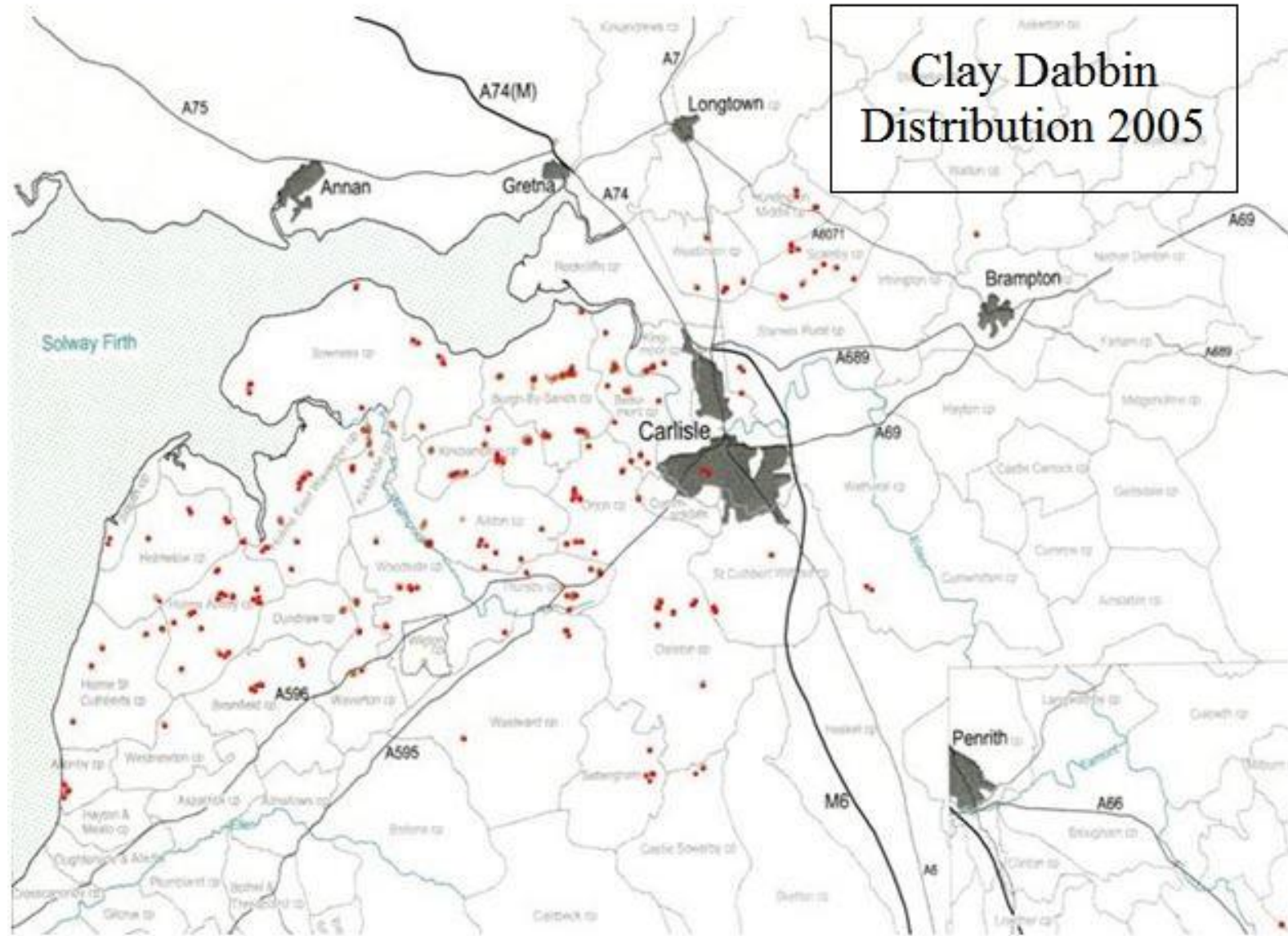


English Heritage

September 2006

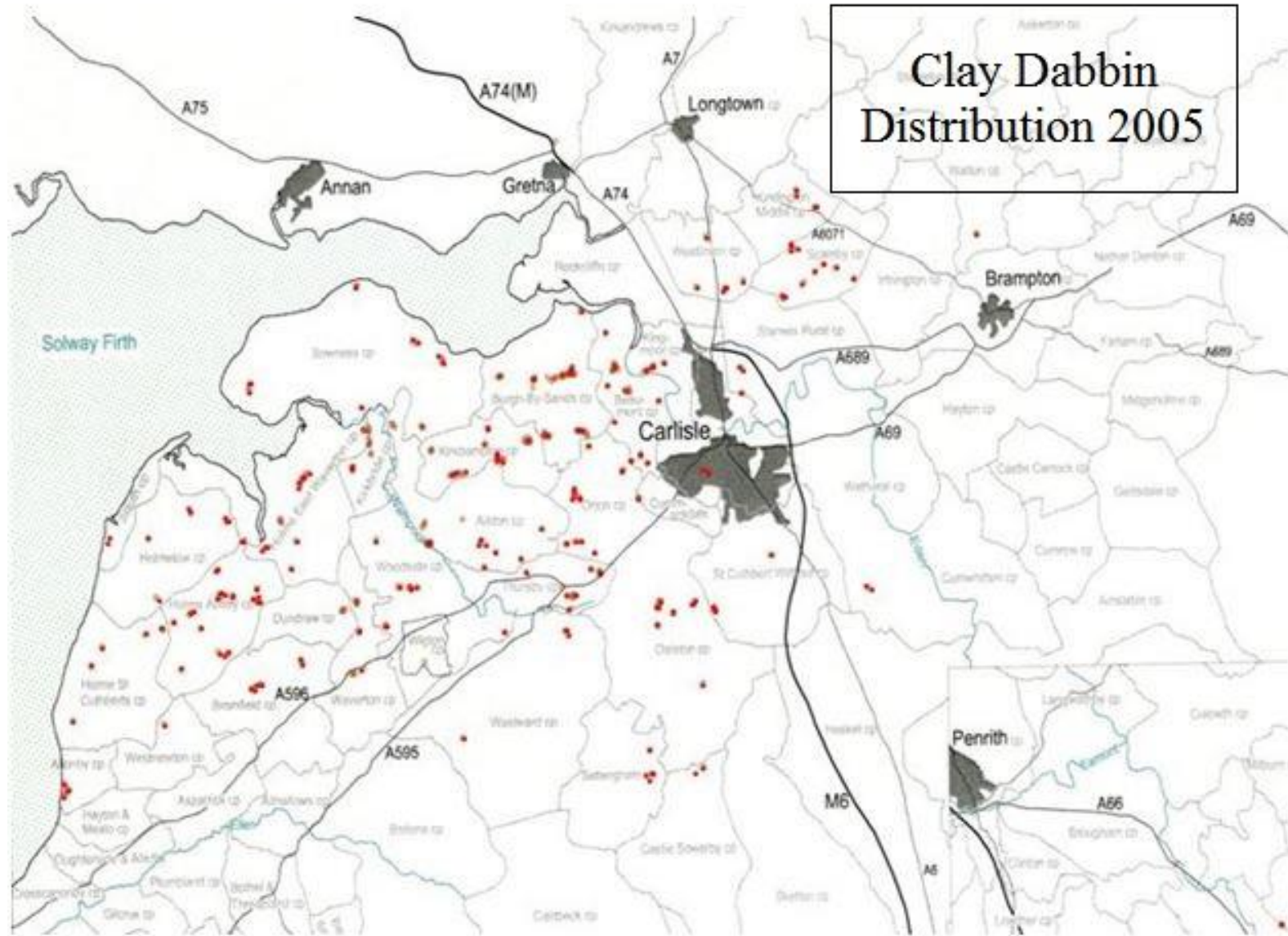
Issue No: 2004-2005/264  
OAN Job No: L9207

# Clay Dabbin Distribution 2005



One Surprise!

# Clay Dabbin Distribution 2005





# Broom Cottage Long Marton







## 5. RESULTS: SURVIVAL AND CONDITION

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### 5.1 THE CURRENT STATE OF CLAY BUILDINGS

- 5.1.1 Of the 312 sites identified as having clay structures, the survey identified 59 where clay buildings had been demolished and eight sites that were previously recorded but could no longer be identified, and are likely also to have been destroyed. This amounts to a loss of just over 21% of identified sites over the last 50 years. The likelihood is that many more clay buildings have been demolished during that time but that these were unknown and their loss has gone unrecorded.
- 5.1.2 In total, 248 sites were investigated where clay buildings survive (Fig 2), ranging from structures almost completely built of clay to those where only fragments of clay wall remained. There are probably other sites that will come to light, just as new ones have been identified during this survey. The fact that many clay buildings have been rendered makes it very difficult to identify all of the surviving clay structures or to refute claims by some owners that no clay survives within a building. Much rebuilding has been carried out and the replacement of clay wall with brick or blockwork is relatively common. Where these buildings are not subject to statutory protection, it is difficult to do more than record them.

The Extensive Survey Report set out criteria of significance for possible listing; and identified those clay buildings at risk.

It also recommended the need to:

identify possible funding for:

promoting appropriate skills training ;

and carrying out additional research on two fronts:

an examination of the Inland Revenue records and

a programme of dendro-sampling on suitable buildings.

All of these were eventually implemented.

The next phase began in 2009 , Funding was provided for 3 years . The Inland Revenue records revealed almost 1200 clay structures within north Cumbria.

Some were recorded as in poor condition , others which were derelict and some which had recently been demolished. During the same period almost 40 buildings were sampled for dendro-dating with over half providing useful results.

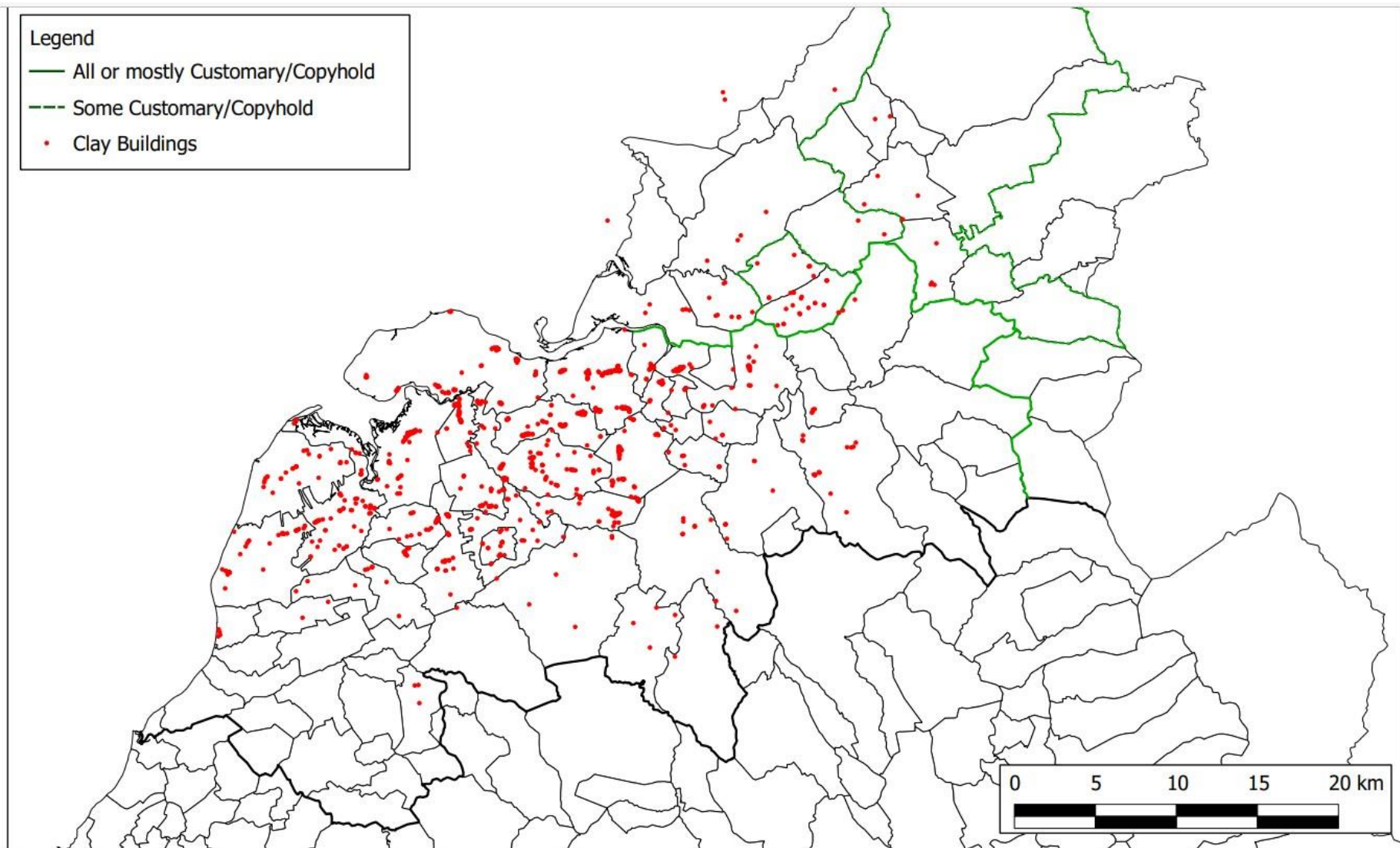
The following map shows the resulting distribution of clay structures in north Cumbria. As it is known that these buildings existed in Westmorland and Furness, an examination of the Inland Revenue documents might identify now lost examples. Or maybe not lost just hidden behind render.

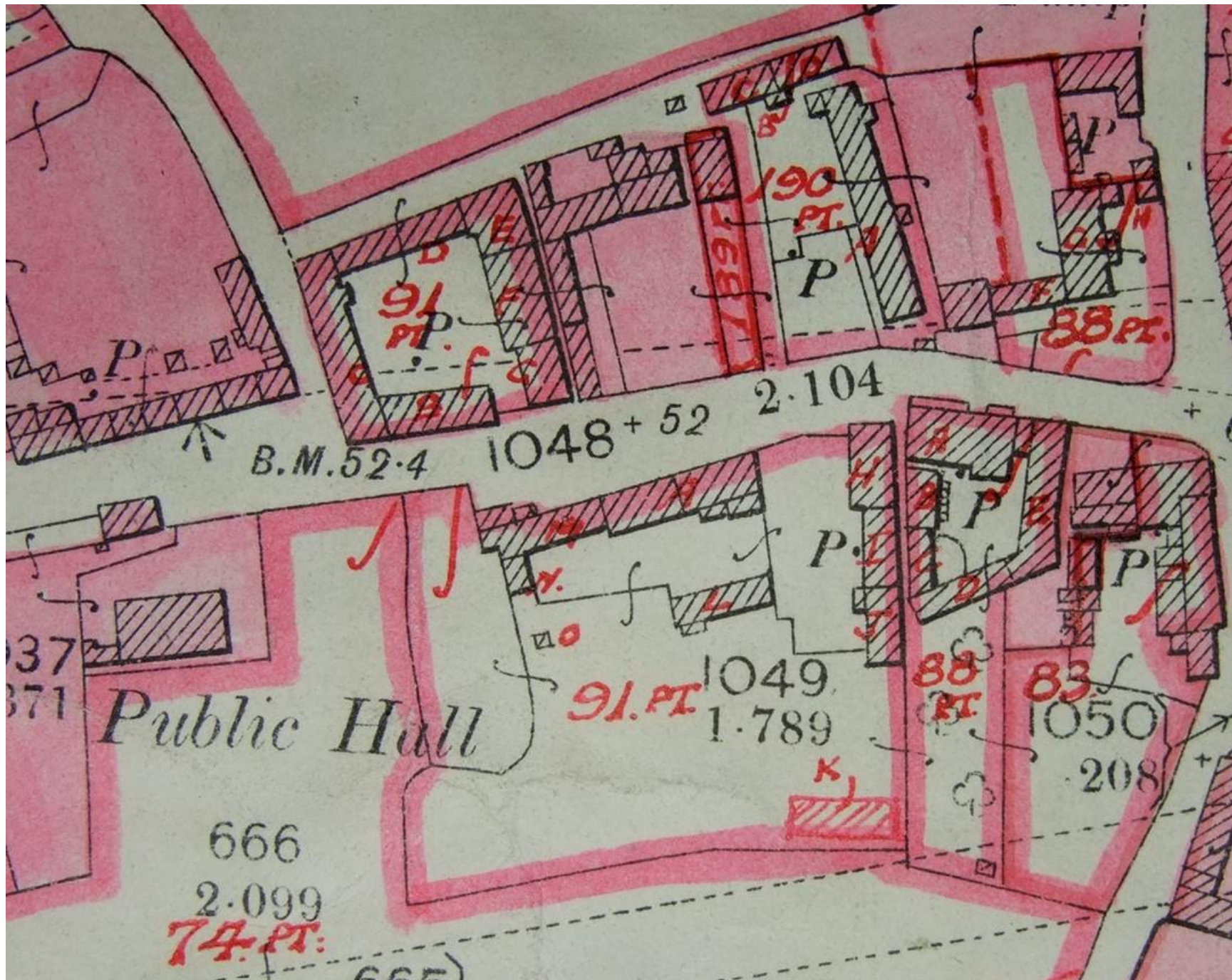
Legend

— All or mostly Customary/Copyhold

- - - Some Customary/Copyhold

• Clay Buildings







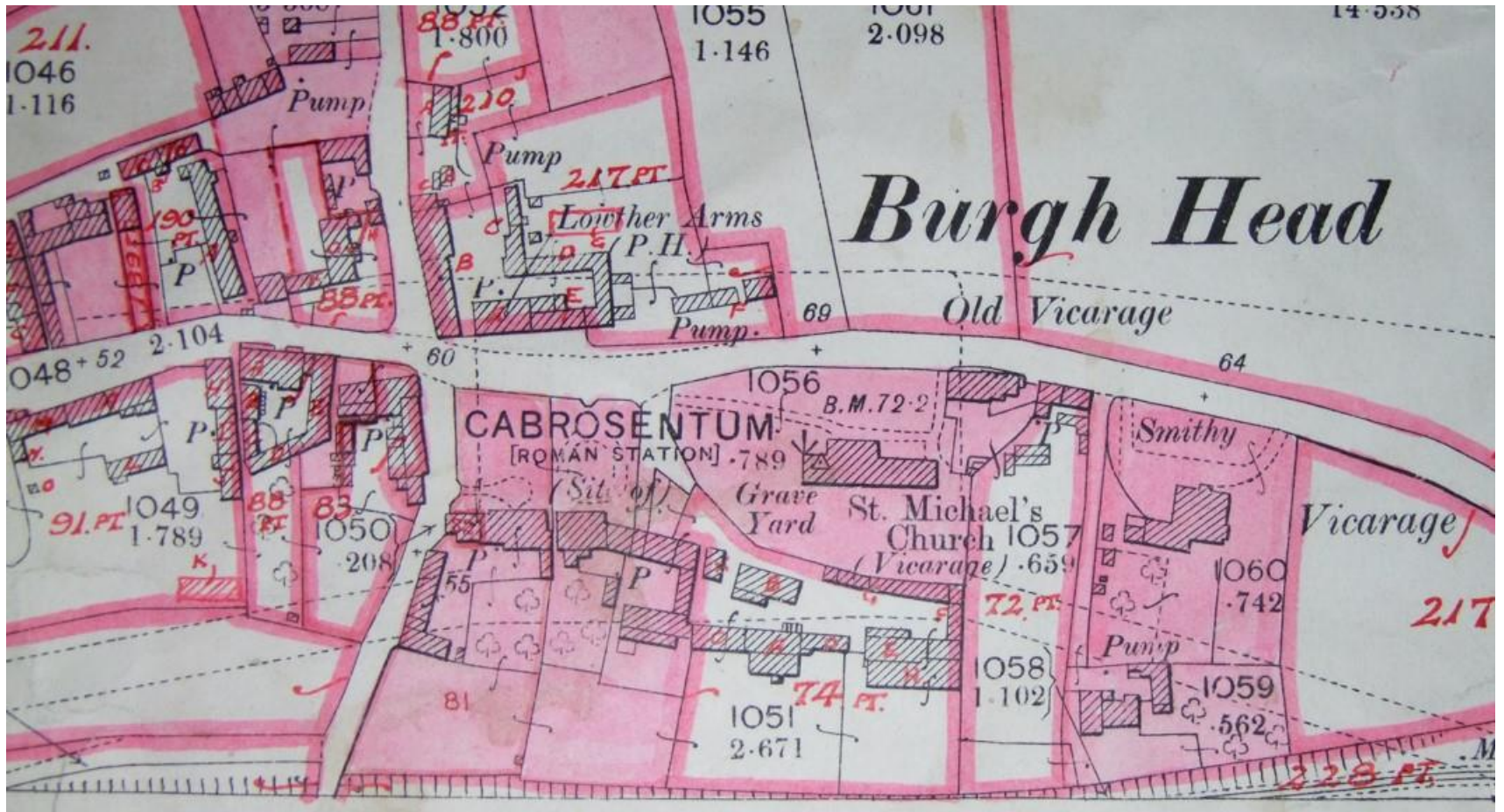






















Brugh.  
vallis paxw.

John Mather de Paddock-hole.

31

	a.	v.	p.	vall paxw.
6. 8. The house yarde and Croft contay	3	1	0	
5. 0. 9. Landes lymg dispersed on Brugh west syde	3	2	15	
4. 0. his Clofe called Edy weay.	1	2	20	
In the 16. parts	0	1	12	
4. 0. 12. Landes lymg to geathor in Moore acre	1	3	20	
5. 0. 2. Landes in Flaw Flatt	1	0	6	
5. 0. 14. Landes in South feilde: 10. lymg to geathor	6	2	6	
In Byrringges medow	0	2	25	
7. 0. The medow roynemg to the South Garth & the Golden	7	1	0	
4. 0. In Oxon Myre Medow	4	2	0	
In toto	30	2	24	

5. 0. The same John Mather houldeth at Thruston feilde a Cottag house & 4. Landes adioynemg	1	3	28	
2. 6. One peece in <u>MicHELL</u> Intack	0	1	26	
<u>MicHELL</u>	2	1	14	



..... 74 ..... Reference No.

Map. No. ....

XV. NE. Q. U.  
" 12. EFKQTU  
" 16. EF.....  
XVI. 5 NR.  
" 9 A B C

Situation

Burgh. by Sands.

Description

House, bldgs & land

Extent

A 131-2-24

Gross Value { Land £ 185.  
Buildings £

Rateable Value { Land £ 166.  
Buildings £

Gross Annual Value, Schedule A, £

Occupier

J. + J. Morley (Wm Brown)

Owner

W. R. B. Smith.

Interest of Owner

freehold.

Superior interests

Subordinate interests

Occupier's tenancy, Term

4 yrs.

from 2nd Feby. 1906.

How determinable

Actual (or Estimated) Rent, £ 146: 5/-

Any other Consideration paid

Reference No.....74

Particulars, description, and notes made on inspection of House, Land, & Buildings. Burgh. including 3 Stints on Burgh Marsh. A. House. 4 Bedrooms, 2 sitting rooms, kitchen, Pantry. Bricks & slated. front better than rest, back only fair. B. old cottage not occupied. 4 bedrooms, 2 Parlours & back kitchen, being used by farm. Mostly clay & slated. C. 4 Stall stable lofted. Bricks & slated. Baye for 6 lofted. Rough stone & slated. Turnip house & baye for 6 lofted. Rough stone & slated. D. Pot house. E.C. ash pit. calf hull. Bricks & slated. E. Pig hull. Barn. Hull (lean-to) Bricks stone & slated. Baye 16 open loft over brick (see over)

Charges, Easements, and Restrictions affecting market value of Fee Simple

Right of way through brd: no: 1066 to meadow beyond, say £5.  
Tithe 9/11 x 35 Y.P. = £16

Leigh Cottage,  
Burgh by Sands  
and Les Cooper













At this point I have to come clean. At the beginning of this talk I described how the method of clay dabbin construction did not fit with the documentary sources and the actual surviving buildings.

However over the last few years a handful of examples have been identified which suggest that memories of clay building construction occurring in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century may not be far fetched.

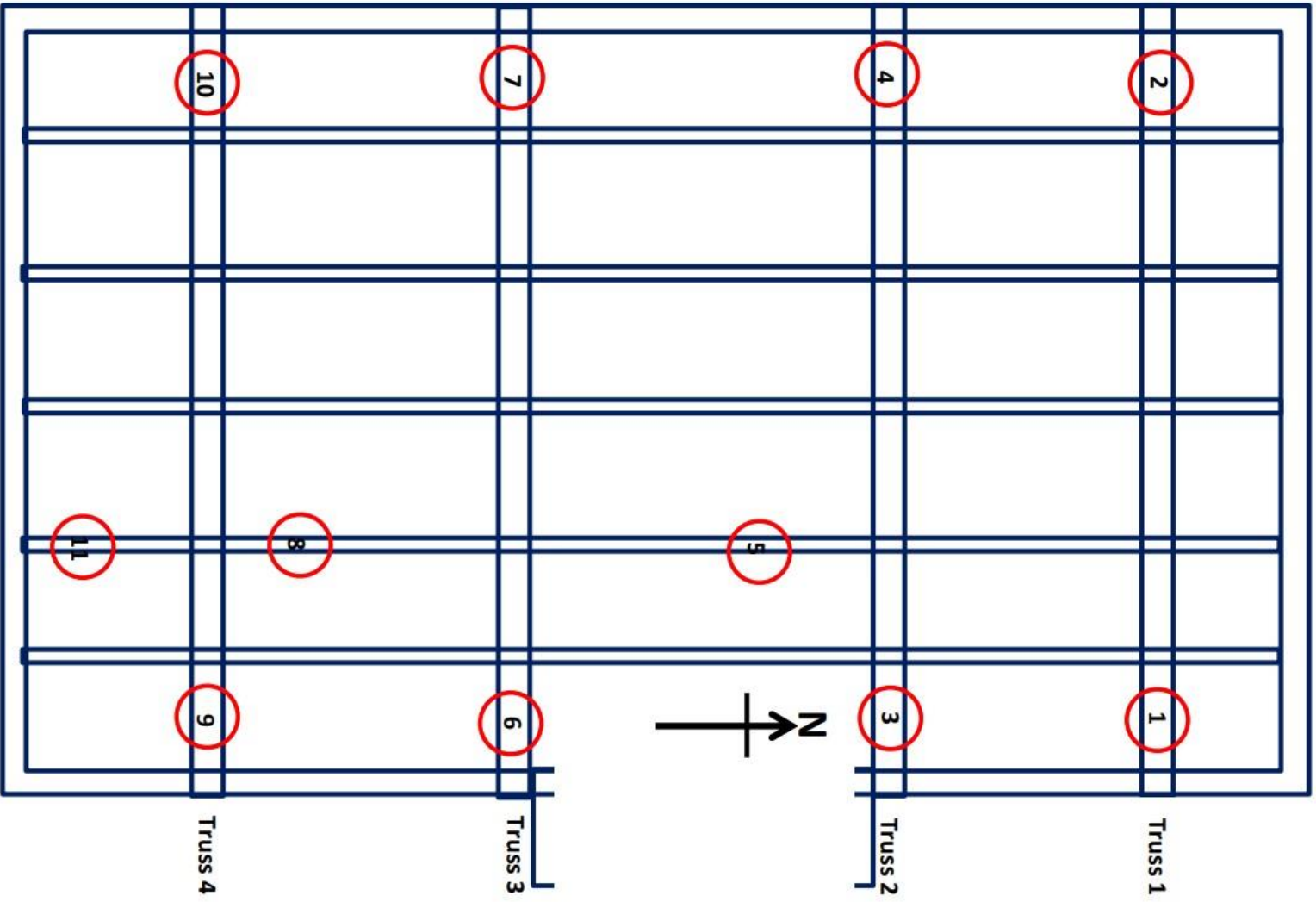












**Table 1:** Details of tree-ring samples from Tarn Farm barn, Wiggonby, near Carlisle, Cumbria

Sample number	Sample location	Total rings	Sapwood rings*	First measured ring date (AD)	Last heartwood ring date (AD)	Last measured ring date (AD)
WIG-A01	East principal rafter, truss 1	50	10	1515	1554	1564
WIG-A02	West principal rafter, truss 1	37	12	-----	-----	-----
WIG-A03	East principal rafter, truss 2	65	h/s	1337	1401	1401
WIG-A04	West principal rafter, truss 2	50	h/s	1502	1551	1551
WIG-A05	East upper purlin, truss 2 – 3	38	no h/s	-----	-----	-----
WIG-A06	East principal rafter, truss 3	56	h/s	1345	1400	1400
WIG-A07	West principal rafter, truss 3	34	6	-----	-----	-----
WIG-A08	East upper purlin, truss 3 – 4	36	h/s	-----	-----	-----
WIG-A09	East principal rafter, truss 4	76	15	1342	1402	1417
WIG-A10	West principal rafter, truss 4	46	11	-----	-----	-----
WIG-A11	East upper purlin, truss 4 – south gable end	39	h/s	-----	-----	-----

\*h/s = the last ring on the sample is at the heartwood/sapwood boundary, ie, only the sapwood rings are missing





We are still losing clay buildings.

So if you know of any that need care and attention don't keep it to yourself.

We are still losing clay buildings.

So if you know of any that need care and attention don't keep it to yourself.

Thankyou.