

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COUNTY OF CUMBRIA

Britain, then called Albion, was inhabited by Giants who were led by Gogmagog and were 12 cubits (about 18 feet) tall. According to Greek Legend they were conquered by the Brutus of Troy and his ally the warlord Corineus, after being banished from Italy for shooting his father. Corineus was given Cornwall which is named after him and Brutus goes on to found "New Troy" which was the original site of London. When Brutus died, Albion was divided between his three sons, Locrinus who received the part of England south of the Humber (Logres), Albanactus receiving Scotland (Albany) and Kamber receiving Wales and Northern England (Kambria or Cymru (Welsh pronounced Kamri)). Or so this is according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th century pseudohistory "[Historia Regum Britaniae](#)" which is also one of the earliest references to King Arthur. This volume is now believed to be a record of national myth written for the consumption of the recently invading Normans and is no more than an imaginative novel.

In reality, until about 13,000 years ago, Cumbria was under thick ice sheets and totally uninhabitable, it was these ice sheets that were responsible for carving out the valleys in the Lake District. It is generally accepted that inhabitants of Cumbria only arrived less than 10,000 years ago and it is more than likely that significant population only started about 5000BC and it is only when we get to the Neolithic period of c. 4500-2350BC that evidence of occupation of Cumbria becomes visible.

One of the most important finds were the green volcanic axe heads produced by the [Langdale Axe Factory](#) and exported all over the UK. It was about the same time that the various [stone circles](#) and henges appeared in Cumbria such as Mayburgh, Long Meg and Castlerigg.

By the Bronze Age (c 2500-700BC) there is more evidence of settlement, with evidence of tree clearing and crop planting on the Solway Plain. [Bronze Age](#) artefacts have been discovered throughout the county, with over half the discoveries being in the Furness area of the county.

The Iron Age (c 800-100BC) saw the arrival of the Celtic culture to the region. With the Carvetii in the north around Carlisle, and the Setantii in the south, until they combined into the Brigantes of Northern England. They probably spoke the ancient [British language of Brythonic](#) which is the predecessor of modern Welsh and they probably named some of the topographical features such as the rivers Kent, Eden, Cocker, Levens etc. as well as mountains such as Blencathra.

After the Roman Invasion in AD 43, the territory of the Brigantes remained independent for quite some time. The rulers, Cartimandua and Venutius were loyal to the Romans and so managed a degree of autonomy and protection from them. However matrimonial problems between them led to divorce and two rebellions. The Romans quashed the first, but the second in AD 69 led to the Romans evacuating Cartimandua and leaving Venutius to reign over the Brigantes. Although the Romans reoccupied the region a few years later, the Brigantes continued rebellious acts for at least another 70 years.

The Romans left a great impression on Cumbria, apart from the well-known Hadrian's Wall they built many roads and forts in the county as well as the ports of Maryport and Ravenglass. Hadrian's wall was completed in about 130 AD and ten years later Antonius Pius tried to move further north and built the Antonine Wall across central Scotland, but never managed to secure control of the Scottish Lowlands and he returned to Hadrian's Wall in about 164 AD.

There was a fort at Kendal (Watercrock) from about 90AD, initially built of wood it was rebuilt in stone after the Romans abandoned the Antonine Wall and was finally given up around 270AD. Nothing remains of this site and most of the recovered artifacts are in Kendal museum. The garrisons remained on Hadrian's Wall until the Romans left in the 5th Century.

After the Roman departure in about 410 AD, Coel Hen became the High King of Northern Britain ruling the area from the Humber to the Tweed, out of his base in York. As Coel Hen literally translates as Old Coel it is thought possible that the 'Old King Cole' nursery rhyme is in fact based on Coel Hen, though other origins have been put forward. Following his death however the kingdom became divided amongst his descendants until the 6th century, when Urien is recorded as the king of Rheged, roughly centred on modern Cumbria but also including large parts of southern Scotland, Lancashire and Yorkshire. The Kingdom of Rheged was based in Llwyfenydd, which is believed to now be Lyvennet Beck a tributary of the River Eden in east Cumbria.

There are many legends entwined with this era, many of which are based on the Arthurian legends so often

associated with areas having Celtic connections. Arthurs father Uther Pendragon is supposed to have lived at Pendragon Castle, high in the upper Eden Valley, although the castle itself is probably 12th century and was originally called Mallerstang Castle. It is also thought that Arthurs last Battle of Camlann, was fought near Birdoswald, the Roman name for it being Cambloglanna.

Urien led the Kings of the North in the battles against the Angles, but he was betrayed by one of his allies and was assassinated in about 585 AD after the battle of Ynys Metcaut (Lindisfarne). By 638 AD Oswui, who would eventually become King of Northumberland, married Riemmelth who was a direct descendant of Urien Rheged and a Princess of the Kingdom. This peaceable alliance between the British and the English earmarked the end of Cumbrian Independence and Angles from the North East began to filter in to Cumbria.

At the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD the Celtic church of the North was abandoned in favour of the Roman Church which was dominant in the South. By then most of Cumbria was ruled by Northumbrian Kings. Churches did exist at this time, some probably even going back to the Roman period, but most have long disappeared or been rebuilt. St. Cuthbert's in Carlisle for example stand on Roman foundations and the first Church may have been built there prior to 686 when St. Cuthbert visited the town. However most churches in Cumbria date from the Norman period which is the 12th century and later. Many churches were substantially rebuilt in the more affluent 18th century or by the Victorians. Carlisle cathedral for example was demolished by Scottish troops in the civil war of 1645-52 in order to build guard houses and repair the city wall.

Around 875 AD the Danes had entered Cumbria via the Stainmore Pass and ransacked the whole area, reducing Carlisle to a ruin for the next two hundred years and annexing Cumbria to the Danelaw. Though it is doubtful it had much effect other than in the extreme south of the area.

However the main [Viking](#) settlement of Cumbria was by the Norse settlers who came in via Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man around about 925AD. It is believed that the Cumbric speaking Kings encouraged this settlement as it provided them with protection from the English in the south.

During much of this period much of Cumbria formed part of the Kingdom of Strathclyde, which was also known as Cumbria. In 945 AD Edmund 1 of England defeated the Cumbrians taking all the land up to Glasgow. He later ceded this land to Malcolm 1 of Scotland, though it is likely that the southern part around Furness, Cartmel and Kendal remained under English control. Edmund was assassinated in 946 and there followed struggles between Viking factions to gain control of York and Northumbria. You can get further details at the [Englands North East](#) website.

The influence of the Vikings remained strong until the middle ages and the arrival of the Normans. A Norse-English creole was spoken up until at least the 12th century. Much of this language is reflected in names such as dale, fell, howe and thwaite, which come from Norwegian.

The Furness Hoard of silver coin come from the period around 955 and many of the names in the Furness area are of Viking origin, though discoveries as far back as the Neolithic period have been made on Walney Island.

When the Normans conquered England in 1066, most of Cumbria was a no-man's land between England and Scotland, which meant it was of no great value to anyone. It therefore does not appear in the Domesday Book compiled for William I. Only some southern areas, generally in the Furness area, are included and even that only as an annex to Yorkshire.

Kendal is listed in the Domesday Book under the name Cherchbi, for many years after it was referred to as Kirkbie Kendal. Kendal Castle was in fact constructed in the late 12th Century. It was for many years home of the Parr family who inherited it in the reign of Edward III and there are still rumours that Catherine Parr, 6th wife of Henry VIII was born there, but this is highly unlikely as by the time she was born Kendal castle was a ruin.

Many churches were built in this period and there were about a dozen houses of monks, nuns and canons in Cumbria all started in the 12th Century, there were also four friaries of which nothing remains.

In 1136 King David of Scotland invaded Carlisle and took possession of much of Cumberland and Westmorland and in 1139 David's son Prince Henry was created Earl of Northumberland. This gave him control over Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire north of the River Ribble. In return for acknowledging their new King, the Norman lords of Cumbria were allowed to keep their lands.

But in 1157 Malcom IV of Scotland gave these lands back to England and it was about this time that the counties

of Cumberland and Westmorland came into existence as administrative districts. Westmorland was not officially created until 1177 from a combination of the Baronies of Appleby and Kendal.

Cumberland had been officially granted to Ranulph le Meschin in 1092, it then reverted to the Crown in 1121 and then after being given back by the Scots in 1157, the barony of Copeland was added to Carlisle to create what was essentially Cumberland, but it was not officially named Cumberland until 1177. It was at this time that the silver mining area of Alston was added to Cumberland after previously being part of Durham.

The period from 1092 to 1136 is covered in [Norman Rule in Cumbria](#)

Lancashire was in fact one of the last counties to be formed in England in 1182, though its boundaries had probably existed since around 1100. Why Furness which is totally isolated from the main county was ceded to Lancashire is a bit of a mystery. But it is probably due to fact that important officials held land both in the Furness area and in Lancashire and that communications between Furness and Lancaster were more established than those with the more remote regions of the northern counties.

You can read [Bygone Cumberland and Westmorland](#) written in 1899 by Daniel Scott for further background information.

In 1216 King Alexander II invaded Cumbria and as King John of England had become so unpopular with the citizens of the county they offered no resistance to him. Alexander was eventually paid to quit by Henry III.

The next 60 years or so was a period of intermittent warfare in the region. By 1286 any semblance of peace was shattered by Edward I who confiscated manors in Scotland and in 1292 he installed John Balliol on the Scottish Throne. Balliol then invaded Cumbria some four years later where Edward I defeated him and took over government of Scotland himself. This led to 300 years of raids and counter raids including those of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce.

One other aspect of this period was the Border Reivers. They take their name from the Old English 'reafian' meaning to rob. They were clan like groups under a given surname. They lived by raiding over the border and rustling sheep and cattle and even looting the armies of their own King. By the 16th century reiving had become so common that the wealthier families took to building Bastle houses or Pele towers for protection. These are fortified dwellings often with room for livestock and supplies and are still a common sight in the north of Cumbria though after the end of the troubles they were often converted back to mansion houses. Towns such as Kendal are built around yards that extend from the high street and are enclosed so that they could be secured against the [Reivers](#).

Kendal is famous for its Green Cloth, used by the Kendalian archers who were so successful at Agincourt and mentioned by Shakespeare in Henry IV Part 1. The letter of protection (essentially an early trade mark) was given to John Kempe in 1331 by King Edward III. The latin motto of Kendal is "Pannus mihi panis", literally meaning "Cloth is my Bread".

Cumbria and the borders had seen no sustained period of peace from 945 to 1560. The treaty of Edinburgh in 1560 resulted in the withdrawal of all English troops from Scotland and the return to France of the French Troops that had fought on the Scottish side. Only when the border effectively disintegrated with the Union of the Crowns in 1603 did reiving start to subside.

James the VI of Scotland and I of England put the borders under the control of a Royal Commission to try and control the reivers. The Graham's and Armstrong's were some of the biggest offenders. At the recommendation of the commission, James exiled a number of the Border clans to Ireland and elsewhere and from this time stems the propagation of some of the typical Border names to all parts of the World.

If your surname is one of the following your ancestors were almost certainly nefarious Border reivers:

Armstrong, Nixon, Elliot, Scott, Johnston, Maxwell, Bell, Hall, Charlton, Milburn, Dodd, Robson, Graham, Noble, Irving, Irvine, Routledge, Forster, Rutherford, Croser, Musgrave, Dacre, Carleton, Ridley, Salkeld, Clifford, Kerr, Turnbull.

If your surname is one of the following your ancestors were probably among the victims or followers of the bandits:

Little, Tweddle, Tailor, Taylor, Hetherington, Barnfather, Skelton, Tordiff, Tremble, Hodgson, Henderson, Story, Davison.

1555 saw the discovery of graphite in Borrowdale (Seathwaite), initially cut into sticks and only used by the locals to mark sheep, its value in making superior cannonballs by lining the moulds with graphite resulting in rounder smoother balls that were much more accurate, was developed in the reign of Elizabeth I (1533-1603) . But it was of course also essential to the steel industry, as well as being used in the first pencils made in Cumberland.

In 1642 the Civil War started and Carlisle declared with the Crown. As a result it was placed under siege for eight months by General Lesley with a Scots army, before it finally surrendered. It was retaken by the Royalists in 1648 but lost again later that same year. By the end of the civil war Carlisle was devastated.

1650 saw the origin of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) when George Fox preached on Pardshaw Crag (Cockermouth) drawing huge crowds. These Quakers also helped John Wesley, who followed in the footsteps of George Fox, establish Methodism in Cumbria in the early 18th century, he visited Cumbria 26 times and was often at Whitehaven.

The 17th century also saw the development of coal mining in the Whitehaven area, although mining had been recorded as early as 1560. It was Sir John Lowther who can be described as the founder of the Whitehaven collieries in the 1600's. In 1715 Sir John installed the first steam engine in Cumbria enabling them to mine to lower levels than previously.

1707 brought the [Act of Union](#) to unite England and Scotland, though this was never popular with most of the Scots. This led to the first Jacobite rebellion of 1715 during which Carlisle chose to imprison anyone with Jacobite sympathies.

The second Jacobite rebellion of 1745 faded for lack of support south of the border, one of the final battles being fought at Clifton Moor, Cumbria in 1745, this is claimed to be the last battle ever fought on English soil, though this is sometimes contested as it was only considered a 'skirmish' and not a full pitched battle.

During this second [Jacobite rebellion](#) of 1745 Carlisle was taken without a fight by Bonnie Prince Charlie. He left a small garrison there to defend it during his retreat back to Scotland, this led to the siege of Carlisle in December 1745 which the Duke of Cumberland won after only 9 days, the garrison surrendered only to be all put to death for treason. Carlisle was the last city in England to be held under siege.

By the middle of the 18th century Whitehaven was a major English port being third after only London and Bristol. Whitehaven had originally been the idea of the Lowther family. They started the port around 1630 in order to export coal from his newly purchased estates, mainly to Ireland. As well as being a major ship building centre, it handled the export of coal and import of tobacco from America as well as rum and spices from the West Indies, hence the Cumbria delicacies or rum butter, Cumberland Sausage and gingerbread. During the American War of Independence John Paul Jones led a naval raid on the town in 1778. George Washington had strong connections with Whitehaven and were it not for the death of his father he would have attended Appleby Grammar School in Westmorland where his elder brothers were educated.

By the beginning of the 18th century, [land enclosure](#) had started to take place and many small farms were incorporated into larger estates. In 1781 William Pitt the Younger (the youngest ever Prime Minister) was elected by the borough of Appleby, though only because he obtained the patronage of James Lowther who had that borough in his pocket. James Lowther was known as "Wicked Jimmy" (or one of several other nicknames), his solicitor was John Wordsworth, father of the poet William, and when he John died he was owed £4,000 (well over a quarter of a million in today's money) a debt eventually only paid to William when William Lowther inherited the title.

By the end of the 18th century tourism had started to become popular, though limited to the richer clientele. It was made even more popular by the likes of William Wordsworth who was publishing his works by the end of the 1700's.

But all was not well, in 1812 hunger riots occurred in Carlisle because living conditions were so bad and in 1819 the weavers of Carlisle petitioned the Prince Regent to be sent to America to escape the terrible conditions in which they lived and worked. Even as late as 1838 there were enquiries into their insanitary living conditions. It was only in the late 1800's that housing development to the west of the city walls relieved this situation.

In 1831 Jonathan Dodgson Carr, the son of a Kendal Quaker, walked to Carlisle and established the now famous Carrs Biscuit Factory, they are perhaps best known for their Crackers or Water Biscuits. In 1839 iron ore was discovered in the Furness area and this availability of steel allowed the development of Barrow into a significant producer of naval vessels, particularly submarines.

The advent of the [railways](#) made tourism even more popular, the first railway being Newcastle to Carlisle in 1836 and the main Lancaster to Carlisle line being opened in 1846 and the extension to Windermere in 1847. The original plans for Lancaster to Carlisle would have bypassed Kendal and gone through the Lune Valley a much easier route, but pressure from Kendal forced the builders to take the route through the Kent Valley and the much more difficult climb over Grayrigg and Shap. The Maryport to Carlisle line was started in 1840 and completed in 1845 the intention being to open up the northern coalfields and develop the harbour at Maryport, it had the added advantage of connecting up with the line onwards to Newcastle. The Furness railway also started around 1846 and was completed in stages, firstly in the Barrow-in-Furness region to provide a shipping route for coal and iron ore produced in Furness. It did not connect up to Whitehaven until about 1850 and the through route from Carnforth to Carlisle via the west coast was not available until 1857. But certainly by 1860 there was a significant railway network in Cumbria.

Although there had always been migration from Ireland in Cumbria, this really took off with the introduction of better steam services in around 1820. Competition rapidly dropped fares to around 10d in steerage and 3d on deck. These were affordable to the majority, considering a navvy could earn 4s a day. Significant numbers of Irish Workers came in through the ports of Barrow and Whitehaven and although many were bound for the industrial areas of Northumberland, many came into Cumbria to work on the railways, coal fields and steel industries. There was a boost to this migration around the time of the potato famine in 1847. Many Cumbrians may therefore find they have Irish roots. As Ireland was part of Britain at this time there was unfortunately no requirement for any shipping records to be kept and these movements went unrecorded.

This took us into the modern Victorian era and the stability this brought allowed Cumbria to develop, not only with tourism but with industry as well. The Lake District National Park was formed in 1951 and is now the most visited National Park in the UK.

1974 saw the re-drawing of administrative boundaries through most of the UK. The modern administrative area of Cumbria was formed by the combination of historic counties of Cumberland and Westmorland as well as the Sedbergh District of Yorkshire and the Furness District of Lancashire. Most people consider that Cumbria actually replaced the old counties, when in fact they still legally exist and the new 'county' is actually just an administrative district. So if you still wish to address your letters to Barrow-in-Furness, Lancashire, or Sedbergh, Yorkshire you are legally entitled to do so.

One area that can confuse researchers into family history are the Townships in Northern England, these are virtually unknown in the south. A township is a subdivision of a Parish, whilst it may have its own church and therefore its own records, it may or may not coincide with a chapelry which is the other ecclesiastical subdivision of a parish. In general they came about as parishes could be too large to be administered conveniently. Most of these townships disappeared by the late 1860's when communications became better and the requirement for these separately administered areas decreased. Between 1844 and 1894 there were various acts of Parliament that affect parish boundaries with the Local Government Act of 1894 establishing civil parishes as we know them today.

Cumbria is the most North Westerly district of England. It is one of the most sparsely populated and has the highest point in England, Scafell Pike (978 metres).