

ART. X. - *Peat Storage Huts in Eskdale.*

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ALTHOUGH neither as extensive nor as deep as the blanket peat cover of many other parts of upland Britain, peat deposits on the flatter parts of the Lake District fells were of sufficient extent¹ to form an important element in the traditional farming economy of the area by providing a source of fuel for the hearth of farmhouse and cottage alike. Indeed, the remnants of ancient woodland in the Lake District had come to be jealously guarded, primarily for charcoal production, by the 16th century² and many Lakeland communities relied heavily on peat as a source of fuel until improvements in communications in the Industrial Revolution made coal more easily available. In many parts of the Lake District this aspect of the traditional way of life has left few marks on the landscape today: a track leading from the valley bottom to the now almost imperceptible peat diggings often provides the only physical reminder of the former practice. In Eskdale, however, the fellsides are scattered with the remains of small dry-stone huts (known as "peat scales") in which peat was dried and stored. A survey of these peat storage huts in Eskdale was undertaken in August 1982, with the help of a small group of American volunteers, recruited by the Earthwatch organization of Belmont, Massachusetts, as part of a project organized by the Brathay Centre for Exploration and Field Studies. The aim of this paper is to report the findings of this survey and to discuss the documentary evidence which throws light on former peat-cutting practices in Eskdale.

Field Survey

Thirty-five peat storage huts were identified on the fellsides surrounding Eskdale, upstream from Eskdale Green. The structures were identified initially from Ordnance Survey aerial photographs³ and from first edition Ordnance Survey 1:2,500 plans, surveyed in 1860.⁴ A measured sketch plan of each hut was made from field observations and detailed plans were prepared for selected huts (see Fig. 3). The location of the huts is shown in Fig. 1 and a summary of the information concerning each structure is given in Appendix I.

The thirty-five huts are scattered along the valley sides, usually near the marked break in slope between the peat-yielding plateau, which occurs at *c.* 300 m. (900-1,000 ft.) above sea level on both sides of the valley, and the steep drop down to the valley floor. Most huts lie on unenclosed common land but five are in fellside pastures within the intake wall. In many cases they have been built beside carefully graded sledge tracks, which zig-zag up the fellsides to the peat deposits. The largest concentration is the cluster of nine huts on Boot Bank at the head of the track from Boot to the peat mosses on Longrigg, and smaller groups are associated with other tracks, notably that climbing from Penny Hill to Kepple Crag (see Fig. 1).

The huts were simple, rectangular, dry-stone structures, built of readily obtained granite rubble. Their external dimensions were of the order of 4.5-6.5 m. by 3.5-5.5 m. In one case (no. 31 on Fig. 1) two huts appeared to have been built

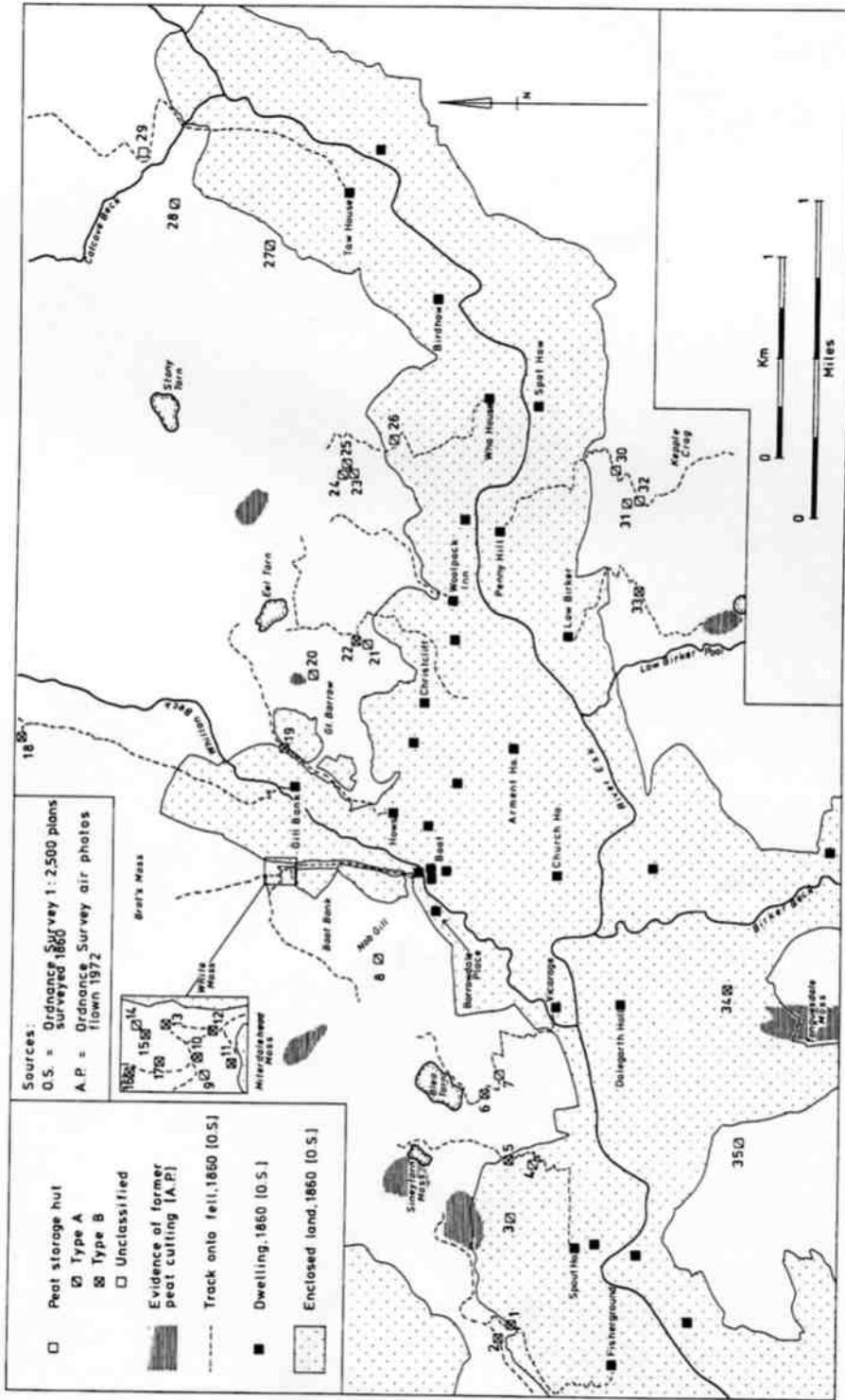


FIG. 1. - Features associated with peat cutting in Eskdale.

together, sharing a common dividing wall. That they were originally roofed structures is indicated by the evidence of gables in almost all cases.

It was immediately apparent that there were two contrasting types of peat storage hut in the valley (see Fig. 2). One (henceforth termed Type A) was a simple, low hut with a gable height of *c.* 2.5 m., built on a level patch of ground, and having one entrance. The other (Type B) was akin to the familiar "bank barn" of the Lake District in that it was built into the hillside in such a way that it had two entrances, an upper doorway on the uphill side, often approached by an elaborately constructed ramp or platform, and a lower entrance on the downhill side. The Type B huts were generally much more substantial structures than those of Type A.

A total of eighteen huts could be classified as belonging to Type A. It was striking, first, that all the huts in the upper reaches of the valley (above the Woolpack Inn on the north and Penny Hill on the south) fell into this category and second, that, while nearly all the Type B huts lay on or very close to well-made sledge tracks, eight of the Type A huts were not associated with an obvious track. The Type A huts appear to have gone out of use by the mid 19th century. With one exception (no. 9 on Fig. 1) none was shown as a roofed structure on the first edition Ordnance Survey plans of 1860 (indeed, seven were not marked at all), and it was striking that (again with the one exception) none bore evidence of having had a slate roof (i.e. no fragments of roofing slate were found). It is likely that they were roofed with bracken thatch, the traditional roofing material in the Eskdale area before the early 18th century.⁵ In several cases (nos. 4, 20, 24, 28) the foundations of rectangular structures were visible close to surviving huts, implying that some at least of the Type A huts were built on the sites of still earlier huts on the fellsides.

The sixteen Type B huts were both more elaborate and arguably of later date than those of Type A. As noted, they were nearly all associated with well-made sledge tracks and several had stone-built ramps leading to their upper doorways and levelled areas in front of their lower entrances. In most cases there was evidence of a slate roof and, with three exceptions (nos. 6, 12, and 34), each structure of this type was shown as roofed (and presumably then, or recently, in use) on the Ordnance Survey plans of 1860. In three cases a Type B hut is paired with a Type A hut on a track up to the mosses, suggesting that the Type B hut was built to replace the earlier hut nearby. Thus hut no. 4 may have been superseded by no. 5; no. 7 by no. 6; and no. 21 by no. 22 (see Fig. 1).

The results of field observation and an examination of the earliest Ordnance Survey maps allow some tentative conclusions to be drawn. A change from low, thatched peat storage huts to the more elaborate "bank-barn" type of hut seems to have taken place at some time before 1860. The change to a more substantial type of hut may have been associated with the construction of durable, graded sledge tracks up to the peat mosses, and it may also have been related to a concentration of peat-digging in the extensive mosses between Blea Tarn and Burnmoor on the north and around Low Birker Pool and Tonguesdale Moss in the south. The absence of the later type of storage hut from the upper reaches of the valley may indicate that the smaller deposits of peat in that area had ceased to be worked (or had been worked out) by the date of the change of building style.

Documentary and Oral Evidence

That the structures on the fellsides described above were indeed huts for the storage

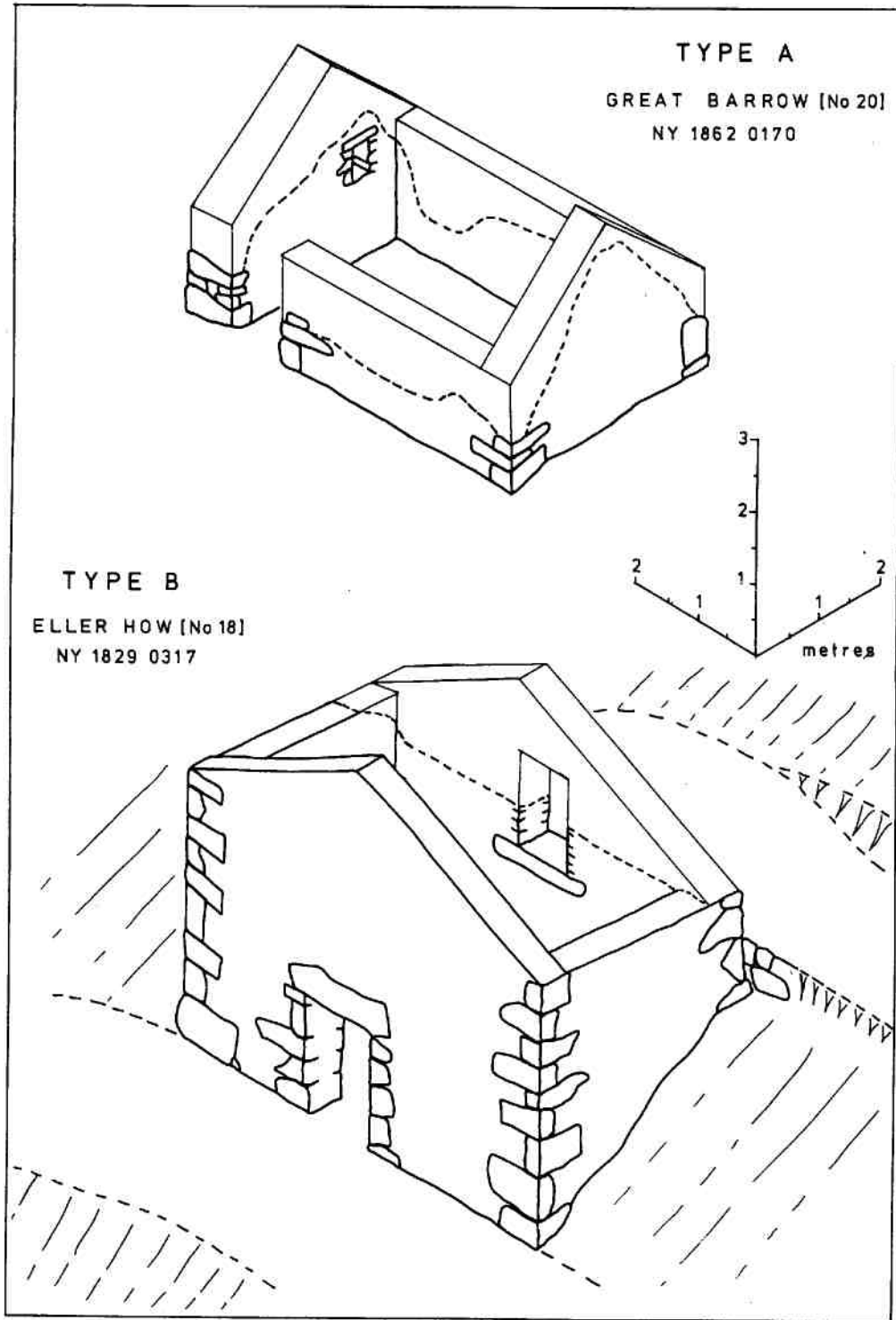


FIG. 2. - Types A and B storage huts.

of peat is confirmed both by local tradition⁶ and by references in documents drawn up in connection with a lawsuit in 1795 concerning the illegal enclosure of the fellside between Blea Tarn and Boot Bank.⁷ The brief for the plaintiff's lawyer gives a succinct description of the use of the huts at that date:

as the places for Turbary lay upon the Tops of the Hills and it is often difficult to win their peats in Summer, every Tenant has a House or Peat Scale in some suitable place where he can conveniently go in Winter to fetch his Peats from when they are wanted and where they are deposited in Summer and stored up for that purpose.⁸

A sketch map drawn to accompany the brief (Fig. 4) clearly marks several "peat scales" in the area in question, including the cluster on Boot Bank (nos. 9-17 in Fig. 1).

The description of the use of the huts towards the end of the 18th century, quoted above, corresponds closely with local memories of the latter days of peat-cutting in Eskdale in the years after the First World War.⁹ Then, peat was cut, dried in stacks on the peat moss for four or five weeks, then taken by sledge to the peat scale, where it was left to dry out further until it was brought to the farm as needed during the winter. The semi-dried peats were tipped into the storage shed through the upper door and were shovelled out through the lower door. Each peat scale belonged to a different house in the valley and the location of the peat scales on the fellsides was generally determined by the pattern of sheep "drifts", the recognized routes along which sheep were driven from the farmsteads to the high fells.¹⁰ Thus hut no. 19, lying at the head of the narrow driftway on the north-western side of the intakes on Great Barrow, preserved to allow stock from Hows Farm to be driven to the fell, belonged to Hows Farm. Other huts where ownership has been identified include numbers 1 (Fisher Ground), 2 (Hollinhow), 6 (the Vicarage),¹¹ 8 (Borrowdale Place until the late 18th century),¹² 9-17 (Church House, Borrowdale Place, and the houses and cottages in Boot), 18 (Gillbank), 20 (Christcliff), 21 or 22 (Arment House), 30-32 (Penny Hill, Spot How), 33 (Low Birker), and 34 (Dalegarth Hall).¹³ Oral evidence suggests that the huts finally ceased to be used for peat storage between the First and Second World Wars. The hut belonging to Gillbank Farm (no. 18) was last used *c.* 1923¹⁴ and in the 1940s disused peat-cutting equipment in the huts on Boot Bank was finally removed.¹⁵

Documentary evidence is less forthcoming, however, about the chronology of, first, the origins of the custom of building peat scales in Eskdale and second, the change in building style from Type A to Type B huts. All that can be said with certainty about the origins of the peat scales is that some, at least, were in existence by the late 16th century. The Eskdale Commons Award of 1587 mentions "guddum peat skales" on the cattle drift route from Bird How and Taw House to "Cattbeck" (now Catcove Beck),¹⁶ a description which suggests that they might be identified with huts 27 or 28. Other early references to the huts are scarce. A "skale-house" in Miterdale, belonging to the tenant of Bakerstead in 1587,¹⁷ may have been associated with peat storage. A "scale or peat house" near "Haslegill" in Austhwaite, mentioned in 1716,¹⁸ certainly was.

The papers concerning the 1795 lawsuit, quoted above, also throw a chance glimmer of light on the date of the change from Type A to Type B huts. As Fig. 4 shows, the sketch plan drawn for the case marks several peat scales including that at Nab Gill (no. 8), which it labels "Old Peat Scale" and the group at the head of Boot Bank, one of

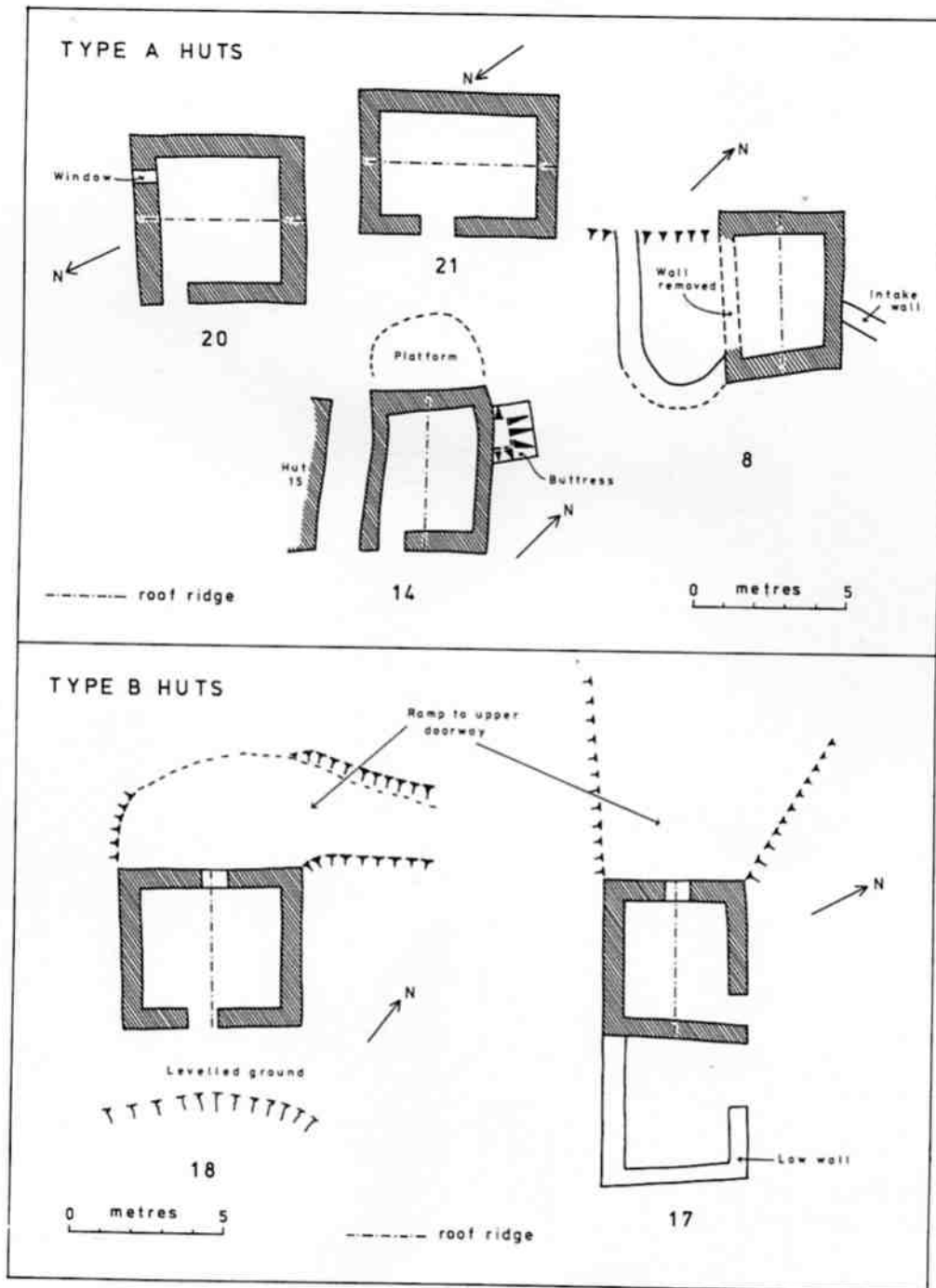


FIG. 3. - Plans of selected peat storage huts.

