Bassenthwaite wood pasture project:
Woodland archaeology case study 9

Pollards in St Johns in the Vale

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Photo record: folder Mirehouse images 006-028; folder St Johns images 001-153
Location: first stop to see an old laid hedge opposite barn of Mire House farm, south of Thelkeld; observations on roadside and riverside pollards near Bram Crag; then along to near the southern end of St Johns in the Vale at Fornside Farm.

Aim of visit
This is the final set of observations on pollards and wood pastures in the Bassenthwaite catchment, carried out in 2007 and 2008 as a project for the Bassenthwaite Reflections programme through Grampus Heritage. Most of the other case studies for the project lie within upper Borrowdale, but Alan Shepley had been looking at pollards in St Johns in the Vale and recommended the area to me.

Hedge at Mirehouse
On several occasions I had seen quite massive veteran hedgerow trees laid horizontally, and retaining that shape into old age, even when the hedge itself had almost disappeared. This hedge below the public road just south of Mire House Farm had been laid in more recent decades, but then left to grow. It has good examples of hedge laid birch in it, as well as the more usual ash. These demonstrate clearly how the distinctive laid hedge shape can arise over a long period.

Valley pollards near Bram Crag
Several groups of pollards are visible from the road just north of Bram Cragg Farm. First some typical roadside ash pollards, recently re-pollarded, but hollow and with clear evidence of previous pollarding, sited just inside the roadside dyke, a typical location. A second group lies beside the St John’s Beck: these too have been recently re-pollarded perhaps for practical reasons so as not to shade the river. However they are fairly mature maiden ash and not old pollards. A third example is a much older pollard than any of these, imbedded in the wall of the
field systems just north of Bram Crag Farm and so clearly older than that wall. This tree is very hollow and aged, and probably lies on a very old wall line, which might correlate with old maps.

Ancient pollard ash built into the dyke below Bram Crag; probably an old dyke alignment which has been rebuilt and the wall now appears to lean against the tree.

**Fornside Farm**

A little further south in the valley is a farm with footpath access advertised, and which makes a good case study showing several very good aspects of traditional pollards and their locations in the historic landscape. The first pollards are visible immediately after entering the farm access. There are free standing ash pollards which at first sight are independent and sited at random in the landscape. Of course they are not at random, as this study has found few that are. Two pollards are in line with a large stone in the field and a slight raised bank now ploughed out which indicate an old field boundary.

Another group of ash pollards lie either side of a beck which has been built up on either bank into levees. Some of these pollards are clearly of great age. A third group of pollards seem to be on other old field boundary alignments, some of which have upright dykes and some of which do not. It would make an interesting study to correlate pollard size and age with dyke age and presence on old maps. Most of these pollards are of ash, but one big and burry oak pollard on the line of an old dyke is also impressive. The old valley road winds past the farmhouse and has a large triple-stemmed ash pollard beside a caravan. Compare this with the new road near the river which has no old pollards at roadside.
Two pollards in alignment with a large stone are probably sited on an old field boundary.

Four views of the long avenue of old pollards either side of the beck below the farm at Fornside.
Two ash pollards on what must be an old field boundary

Old oak pollard on the same boundary alignment as the two ash in the above photo
L: Large burry oak pollard above a massive dyke (same tree as last photo) R: triple stemmed ash pollard on the low side of the old track which runs past the farm buildings

‘Frith’ wood pasture at Fornside
As well as the many low ground pollards at Fornside, another feature adds to its interest as a pollard case study – the open grazed woodland lying on the mid hill just south of the farm. It is situated between low arable land and the dyked off hill land, a middle position often called the frith, as it also is in Wales (frydd). As has been seen in other case studies this can be the location in the North Lakes for pollarded woodlands on moderately rough and steep ground but below the ‘head dyke,’ to use a Scottish term. It is noticeable that the fields here below this head dyke have been substantially re-designed, but because it is not good arable land, all manner of traces of the old field boundaries remain, including the base stones of dykes otherwise removed. Some old pollards must pre-date these changes and remain adjacent to now defunct field boundaries, a phenomenon repeatedly observed during this study.

This view of the open and only partly wooded area south of Fornside Farm buildings shows a pattern of old field boundary dykes and relicts of previous dykes
Relict field boundaries just south of the wood pasture area with pollards

View from the south of the frith wood pasture with many ash pollards, some of them of good age
View north overlooking the frith wood pasture. Note the lower massive ash pollard, itself on an old field boundary now hardly discernible (also seen on page 10 below).

Second view across the lower part of the frith wood pasture with numerous ash pollards. This photo typifies the character of the best of the traditional pollarded wood pasture landscape.
Recently re-pollarded ash in the Fornside frith wood pasture. (my dendrochronology colleagues should note that there are many such cut branch samples lying on the ground in re-cut pollards in the N Lakes which would merit careful recording of ages)

Nice group of ash pollards at the top edge of the wood pasture
Rig cultivation, only noticed in this photo after the visit. This site has excellent evidence of old land-uses.

Another old field boundary with remnant dykes, hedges and a small ash/hazel wood on boulder scree lies south of the above fields and is enclosed by the large head dyke which is probably a later feature, though has some ash pollards just below it further along. The conifers all lie above that head dyke.
The large skirted and recently re-cut ash pollard, also seen in the photo at top of page 7. This tree lies at the foot of the frith wood pasture, and alongside the upper boundary of the old arable field below it.

This iconic tree epitomises the way that the oldest Lake District pollards are indeed a form of living archaeology. They are themselves part of the remains of a pre-improvement historic landscape, contemporary with the old small fields of ridge and furrow, the old tracks, and the oldest of the enclosure dykes and hedges. Their conservation has benefits not only for biodiversity and amenity, but as living evidence of bygone ways of farming and life in the Lake District.

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