
The Use of Lakes as Natural Resources in Late Medieval England: A Study on Lake Windermere, the Lake District

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Abstract

This is a case study on how a lake was used as a natural resource by residents and lords in late medieval England. The subject of this case study is Lake Windermere in the Lake District.

The studies of rural society in medieval England have chiefly focused on areas where crop production was the main livelihood, and areas that were not suitable for cultivation were set aside as the ‘marginal’ areas. However, in recent years, interest in the marginal areas, specifically the use of natural resources, has been growing.

In the north-western upland, one of the marginal areas of medieval England, the land was considered unsuitable for cultivation: hilly and far-reaching terrain with a cold and rainy climate. The present author conducted a case study on the livelihood of Windermere Manor in the north-western upland. In this study, as an extension of the present author’s previous case study, we will analyze some aspects of how Windermere Lake, which belonged to Windermere Manor and was the largest lake in the Lake District, was used by residents, including farmers, and lords.

In Chapter One, we discuss the layout of Lake Windermere and Windermere Manor. In Chapter Two, we introduce the holders as well as the usage fees of the fishing right of Lake Windermere. In Chapter Three, we discuss how and by whom fishing on Lake Windermere was conducted. In Chapter Four, we examine the role of Bowness, the largest pier on Lake Windermere, in the late medieval period.

In conclusion, we highlight the following two points regarding the use of Lake Windermere by residents and lords: 1) the fishery on the lake was led by leading gentry in the region with the fishery rights, and most of the fish might have been sold nearby, 2) Lake Windermere was also used to transport people and goods around the lake, not just to Windermere Manor.

Introduction

For more than a century, most studies of rural society in medieval England have focused on the common field system and the lowland areas as they were the source of the majority of crop production. First, researchers in the UK have been particularly interested in the common field system and its rise and fall because of England’s earliest abolition of the common field system caused by the enclosure movement in Europe. Secondly, there are abundant records of studies on rural society in areas, such as the Midlands and south-east England, where the core activity was crop production. As a result, less scholarly attention has been given to the ‘marginal’ areas in medieval England; these marginal areas were considered unfit for growing crops and were determined to be poor¹. However, in recent years, several studies on the use of natural resources have revealed that the ‘marginal’ areas were not necessarily poor².

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1. Kato, H., “Tyusei kouki England hokuseikouti ni okeru nousonn no kurasi: Windermere Manor wo reini”, *Ochanomizu shigaku*, no.58 (2015), p.151; Winchester, A. J. L., *The Harvest of the Hills: Rural Life in Northern England and Scottish Border, 1400-1700*, Edinburgh, 2000, pp.1-4.
 2. Dyer, C., *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c.1220-1520*, Cambridge, 1989, p.291; Bailey, M., *A Marginal Economy: East Anglian Breckland in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1989; Williamson, T., *Rabbits, Warrens and Archaeology*,

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In the north-western upland, one of the marginal areas of medieval England, the land was considered unsuitable for cultivation: hilly and far-reaching terrain, with a cold and rainy climate. A previous study cited the following two features of the livelihood of the north-western upland in the late medieval period: 1) ‘transhumance’, which is a system wherein the location of grazing livestock was changed according to the season, 2) grazing animals in the ‘forests’ designed as special hunting jurisdictions³. Furthermore, the previous study divided the north-western upland into four regions, and there might have been differences in the livelihood depending on these regions. However, we cannot be sure of this because only a few historical records exist⁴.

Therefore, to clarify the livelihoods in the marginal areas, it is important to conduct a case study. Hence, the present author has conducted a case study on the livelihood of Windermere Manor in the Lake District in the north-western upland. In the present author’s previous study, Windermere Manor comprised two different types of agricultural and livelihood areas: the upland ‘forest’ area and the non-forest area, a relatively flat land facing the lake. The forest area was a typical north-western upland area. According to previous studies, in the late medieval north-western upland, people used a system called the ‘head-dyke’. The head-dyke was the practice where common fields or meadows enclosed by a bank with a ditch on the outside, where the beginning and the ending dates of co-grazing of livestock were set. Also, transhumance was done in pairs with the head-dyke. In contrast, the non-forest area was an untypical area where a variety of economic activities, such as grazing, cultivation, and woollen cloth production, were practiced⁵.

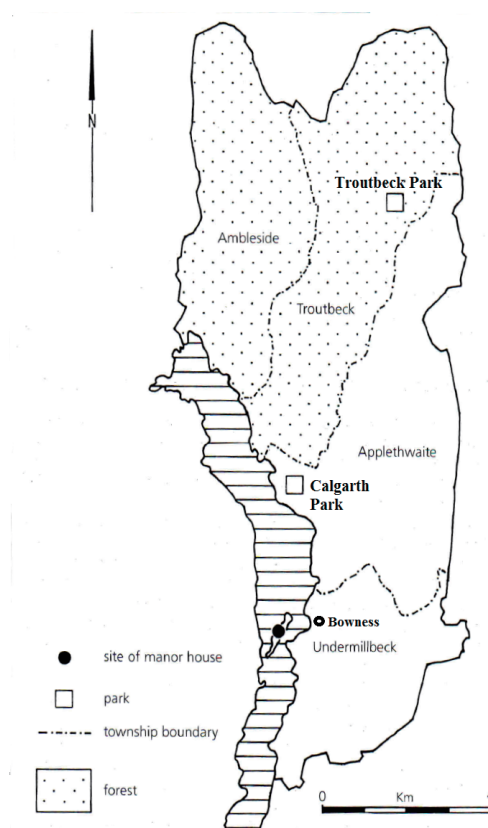
In this study, we will analyze some aspects of how Windermere Lake, which belonged to Windermere Manor and was the largest lake in the Lake District, was used by residents, including farmers, and lords.

Chapter 1

Lake Windermere in the late medieval period

Windermere Manor covered in this study extends to the east coast of Lake Windermere in the southern part of Westmorland (now Cumbria), north-west England, and the area was almost the same as the Windermere parish. Windermere Manor included Lake Windermere and four townships: from the north to Ambleside, Troutbeck, Appletwhaite, and Undermillbeck⁶. There was a manor house on Bell Island, the largest island on Lake Windermere, and between the late 14th century and the 15th century, the lords of Windermere Manor were King Henry VI and other royalty; most of them were non-residents. (See Map 1)

Lake Windermere belonged to Appletwhaite in Windermere Manor, and in particular, Appletwhaite and Undermillbeck faced the lake. Therefore, it is hard to believe that the lake was not fully involved in the livelihood of the residents of these two townships. However, the only historical record of Lake Windermere is that of its fishing right in the late medieval period.



Map 1 Windermere Manor

Winchester, *The Harvest of the Hills*, p.153.
(partly modified by the present author)

Stroud, 2007; Barnes, G. and Williamson, T., *Rethinking Ancient Woodland: The Archaeology and History of Woods in Norfolk*, Hertford, 2015; Cook, H. and Williamson, T. (eds.), *Water Meadows: History, Ecology and Conservation*, Oxford, 2007.

3. Winchester (2000), *passim*.

4. The four regions are the border hills, the Lake District, the northern Pennines, and the central Pennines. (Winchester (2000), pp.2-6, 18-21.)

5. Kato, H., “Tyuusei kouki England kosuutihou no seigyokeitai : Windermere Manor wo reini”, *Seiyō shigaku*, no.266 (2018), pp.1-18; Kato (2015).

6. Nicolson, J. and Burn, R., *The History and Antiquities of the Counties of Westmorland and Cumberland*, vol.1, London, 1777, pp.30-34.

The oldest record of Lake Windermere's fishing right was given by Sir William Lancaster to Furness Abbey on the west coast of the lake in 1246. Furness Abbey was granted the right to have a small boat on Lake Windermere to carry woods and other goods they needed and the right to have 20 nets and a small boat to continue fishing in the lake⁷. From this historical record, it can be confirmed that fishery was carried out on Lake Windermere in the medieval period, and that the lake was used for transporting timbers and other goods, perhaps for people.

Chapter 2

Lake Windermere's fishing right

Lake Windermere's fishing right was frequently given or lent out during the late medieval period. So, who were the holders of the fishing right for the lake? At the end of the 14th century, Edmund Redman held the right at 2 pounds, 6 shillings and 8 pence a year⁸. He was from the leading gentry in the region and was likely a relative of Richard Redman, who later became speaker of the House of Commons. Further, John Philipson and Robert Brathwait held the right at 2 pounds a year in 1441⁹. John and Robert were considered to be wealthy local farmers, judging from their surnames. Then, the lake's fishing right was held by Walter Strickland and his nephew who were among the regional leading gentry from 1442¹⁰. In 1454, Henry Bellingham, also a regional leading gentry, paid the lord 2 pounds and 10 shillings as a fishing right¹¹. From these records, it can be said that the fishing right of Lake Windermere during this period was often owned by the regional leading gentry families, and the usage fee was about 2 pounds per year. Furthermore, it is assumed that the fishery right was a relatively valuable right in Windermere Manor, which was not so attractive to non-resident lords, but was highly useful in the local region and expected to generate some income.

Usually, the fishery right covered the right to take fishes, including possession of boats and nets for fishing, transportation using rivers and lakes, and installation of water wheels¹². In 1454, Henry Bellingham paid 2 pounds and 10 shillings as a fishing right to his lord, but he refused to pay 10 shillings a year as the toll on the lake¹³. In this case, it seems that the lord considered the fishing right as the right to fish in the lake and the possession of boats and nets related to it, and they thought it was separate from the right to transportation as given to Furness Abbey. However, this amount suggests that the right to fish was more valuable than the toll on Lake Windermere.

Chapter 3

Fishing on Lake Windermere

As is often pointed out in previous studies, little is known about medieval England fisheries because there are only a few records that systematically mention fisheries¹⁴. Although there are some studies on inland fisheries, mainly fishponds¹⁵, due to the lack of historical records, it is difficult to clarify the lives of the people who caught fish¹⁶. It is well known that according to the teachings of the church, fish were consumed during Lent and many other

7. *The Coucher Book of Furness Abbey*, vol.1, Atkinson, J. C. (ed.), London, 1886, p.52.

8. *Records of Kendale*, vol.2, Curwen, J. F. (ed.), Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, 1923 (rep.1998-99), p.44.

9. The National Archives, SC2/207/121, verso, line.28-30.

10. *Calendar of the Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office (CPR), 1441-1446*, pp.149, 426.

11. *Records of Kendale*, vol.2, pp.72-73.

12. Getzler, J., *A History of Water Rights at Common Law*, Oxford, 2006, pp.19-22.

13. *Records of Kendale*, vol.2, pp.72-73.

14. Heath, P., "North Sea Fishing in the Fifteenth Century", *Northern History*, 3 (1968), pp.53-54; Bailey, M., "Coastal Fishing off South East Suffolk in the Century After Black Death", *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History*, 37-2 (1990), p.102; Fox, H., *The Evolution of the Fishing Village: Landscape and Society along the South Devon Coast, 1086-1550*, Oxford, 2001, p.1.

15. McDonnell, J., *Inland Fisheries in Medieval Yorkshire*, York, 1981; Aston, M. (ed.), *Medieval Fish, Fisheries and Fishponds in England*, 2vols, London, 1988.

16. Fox (2001), p.107.

special days¹⁷. Freshwater fish could be obtained not only in areas close to the sea but also inland from the fishponds of lords, rivers, and lakes, and freshwater fish were regarded as an important food for the clergy and the nobility¹⁸. However, fish was also consumed by other people. Moreover, Fox, who studied a fishing village in Devon, argues that fish that was abundant and cheap would have been particularly in demand as food in Devon, as there were many people living in places with little or no arable land¹⁹.

The fishery at Lake Windermere was net fishing, and trout, pike, eel, and salmon could be caught²⁰. In the north-western upland, including Windermere Manor, many people lived in places with little or no arable land same as Devon. Therefore, it is believed that the demand for fish was quite high in the north-western upland, although the catch rate of Lake Windermere in the medieval period is uncertain.

In Warkworth, Northumberland, on the northern march like Windermere Manor, 578 salmon and 2,640 trout were caught in the years 1471-72; only one in thirty was taken to the lord's household, and the rest were sold or salted²¹. At the time, important transactions of freshwater fish were concentrated in London²². However, the north-western upland was far from London, and in addition, fish was considered to be in great demand in the north-western upland. For these reasons, it is highly probable that the fish caught in Lake Windermere were consumed relatively nearby, and it is quite possible that the regional leading gentry who owned the fishery right proceeded to catch fish on their own and sold most of the fish nearby.

So, who was then fishing on Lake Windermere? From a historical record that can be read in Windermere's customary law, it is certain that the manor's residents were fishing²³. From the present author's previous studies, it can be seen that pastoralism was the main source of livelihood in Troutbeck and Ambleside, whereas, in Applethwaite and Undermilbeck, pastoralism was not the main source of livelihood. Hence, it is highly probable that fishing was an important livelihood in Applethwaite and Undermilbeck²⁴. This means that many residents of Applethwaite and Undermilbeck were engaged in fishing on Lake Windermere.

In general, residents were often allowed to fish freely in rivers and lakes at certain times and places. However, since there are no rules regarding common of piscary at Lake Windermere in the historical records, it is possible that common of piscary were not set. In that case, the residents (fishermen) were either fishing according to the instructions of the lord or fishing in exchange for the lord's permission or payment of fees to the lord. As mentioned above, the fishing right on Lake Windermere was often rented out. Therefore, fishing permissions and payment of fees by residents should have been exchanged with fishery right holders. Unfortunately, there are no such historical records extant, so it is impossible to know by whom and on what conditions (for example, how much the fisherman paid) fishing in Lake Windermere was carried out in the late medieval period.

Although, the Strickland family, who had the fishing right on Lake Windermere from 1442, also had all the lands and properties of Applethwaite and Undermilbeck²⁵. As a result, residents in both townships borrowed lands and properties from the Strickland family. By putting both fishermen and fishery rights under their control, the Strickland family might have fished on their own and sold most of the fish nearby.

17. McDonnell (1981), pp.1-4.

18. Dyer, C., "The Consumption of Freshwater Fish in Medieval England", in Dyer, C. (ed.), *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, London, 1994, p.101.

19. Fox (2001), p.85.

20. Kipling, C., "The Commercial Fishery of Windermere", *Transactions of the Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian and Archeological society, new series*, no.72 (1972), p.156.

21. Hodgson, J. C., (ed.), *Percy Bailiff's Rolls of the Fifteenth Century*, Durham, 1921, pp.56-62.

22. Dyer (1994), p.108.

23. "It[e]m of fisshers within the lorde severall watter aganst payn" See Cumbria Record Office, DLONS/L/5/2/11/291, line.10.

24. Kato (2018).

25. *CPR, 1441-1446*, p.149.

Chapter 4

Bowness as a hub for people and goods

Currently, Bowness is the largest pier on the shores of Lake Windermere. The name Bowness (Blunes in the medieval period) was found in the records at the end of the 14th century, and at least in 1203, the parish church of St. Martin was placed there, and in the 15th century, the manor court of Windermere was held in this parish church²⁶. Blunes was in the Undermilbeck township, but it is thought that Blunes was not the main settlement because the place name of Undermilbeck was elsewhere in the township. Blunes was also at the shortest distance from Bell Island, where the manor house was located (See Map 1). It is reasonable to think that Blunes already had a dock by the 14th century when it was confirmed that the manor house was on Bell Island, because the lords needed a small boat to go to the manor house²⁷. There was the parish church, and the manor court, which was thought to have been held twice a year²⁸, was also held in the church, so residents of all townships in Windermere Manor gathered regularly in Blunes. It is not clear whether the parish church was built first or the dock, but as mentioned above, Lake Windermere was also used for transporting goods. Blunes was thought to be a place where people and goods around the lake gathered in the late medieval period.

In addition to transporting people and goods, Blunes might also have been a fishing base. According to Fox, in Devon, during the late 15th century and the 16th century, fishermen settled inland, but there were fishing bases on the coast; they were not only fishing but were semi-agricultural and semi-fishing²⁹. In Applethwaite and Undermilbeck, cultivation, pastoralism, and woollen cloth production were carried out, and the main settlement is thought to have been a little inland from the lakeside. Therefore, it is quite possible that Blunes, with a dock, was also the base for fishing.

Conclusion

There is almost no historical record about Lake Windermere in the late medieval period. However, considering the information obtained from limited historical records and what we know about Windermere Manor in this period, we can point out the following two arguments regarding the use of Lake Windermere by residents and lords.

First, it seems natural to consider that most residents of Applethwaite and Undermilbeck were fishing on Lake Windermere along with a variety of economic activities, such as grazing, cultivation, and woollen cloth production. Further, the fishery on the lake was led by leading gentry in the region with the fishery right, and most of the fish might have been sold nearby. Second, Lake Windermere was also used to transport people and a wide range of goods around the lake, not just to Windermere Manor. Furthermore, it is probable that Bowness (Blunes), which had a parish church, was the base where all the people and goods around the lake gathered. Therefore, it is expected that further research in archaeology and other fields will be carried out to throw light on fishery and the use of Lake Windermere in the late medieval period.

26. Homepage of church of St. Martin (<http://www.stmartin.org.uk/tour.html>) (Confirmed September 4, 2019); The National Archives, SC2/207/122

27. *Records of Kendale*, vol.2, pp.60-61.

28. The National Archives, C 139/77/36 mm.41.42; See Homepage of Mapping the Medieval Countryside (<http://www.inquisitionspostmortem.ac.uk/view/inquisition/24-520/541>) (Confirmed September 4, 2019)

29. Fox (2001).