Historic England

Shielings

Introductions to Heritage Assets

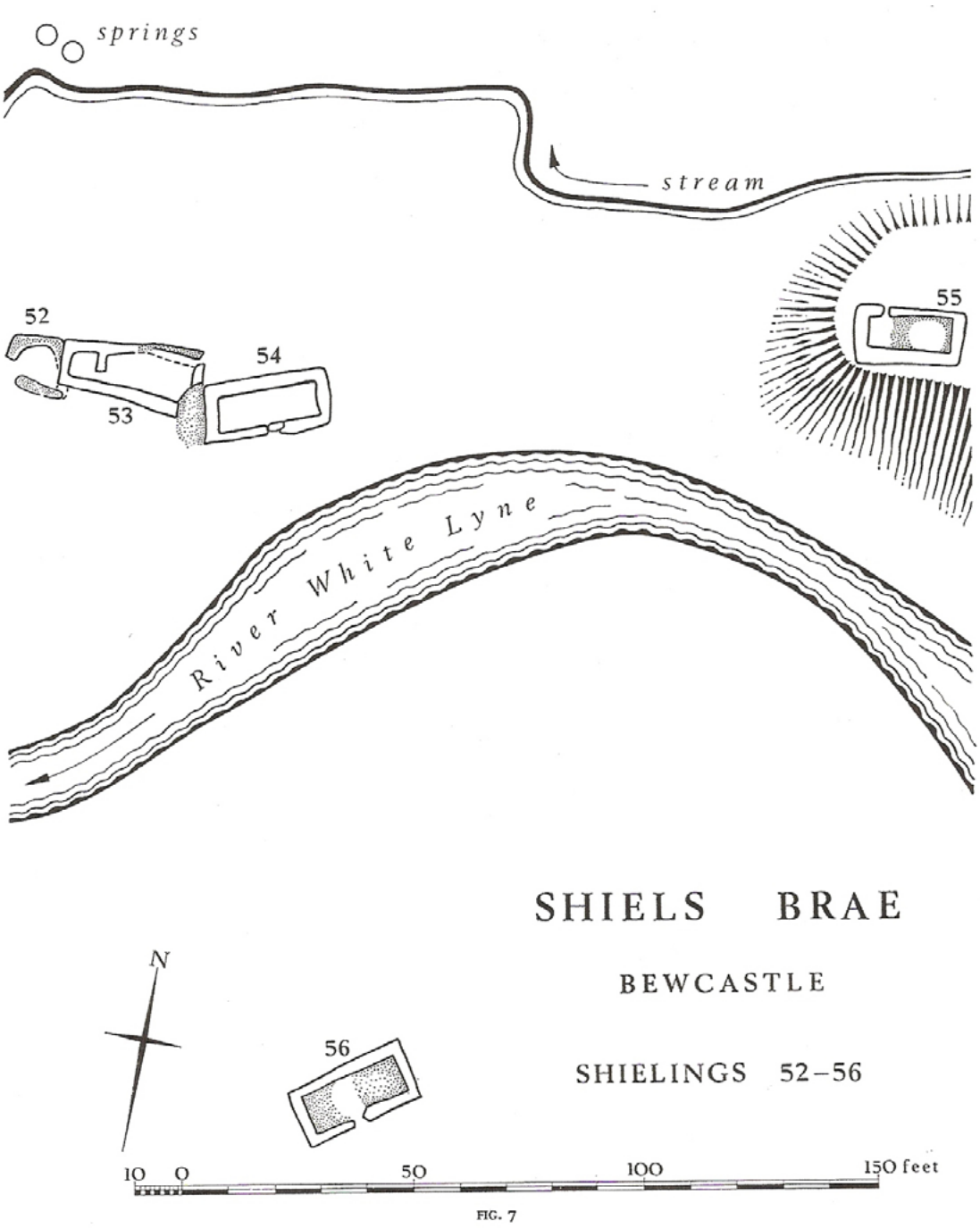

FIG. 7

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to shielings (huts that served as temporary, summer, accommodation for people involved in transhumance, that is the removal of stock from permanent dwellings to exploit areas of summer pasture some distance away from the main settlement). Descriptions of the asset type and its development as well as its associations and a brief chronology are included. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover
Shielings at Shiels Brae, Bewcastle in the valley of the River White Lynne, Cumbria. Plan shows at least three phases of construction.

Introduction

A shieling is a hut, found singly or in small groups, usually in upland areas which today we would consider as agriculturally marginal land. They served as temporary, summer, accommodation for people involved in transhumance, that is the removal of stock (generally, but not exclusively, cattle) from permanent dwellings to exploit areas of summer pasture some distance away from the main settlement. Such settlements are also documented in areas of marsh or fen (Figure 1).

The Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant, in his *Voyage to the Hebrides*' in 1772 (published in 1776), provides the earliest detailed descriptive account of shielings, albeit in a Scottish context:

'I landed on a bank covered with sheelins, the temporary habitations of some peasants who tend the herds of milch cows. These formed a grotesque group; some were oblong, some conic,

Figure 1
General view of shieling site on Alnham Moor, Northumberland National Park, Northumberland.

and so low that the entrance is forbidden without creeping through the opening, which has no other door than a faggot of birch twigs placed there occasionally; they are constructed of branches of trees covered with sods; the furniture a bed of heather; placed on a bank of sod, two blankets and a rug; some dairy vessels; and above, certain pendent shelves made of basket-work, to hold the cheese, the product of the summer. In one of the little conic huts I spied a little infant asleep.'

In many areas the period of the removal of stock to higher ground was tightly controlled either by the lord of the manor or the local manor court. On Alston Moor in Cumbria, the time to be spent at the shielings in the mid-to late 16th century was laid down by the Alston Manor Paine (Penalty) Roll as being from the beginning of May to the end of June inclusive but in other parts of the British Isles the 'summer' ran from May Day to the end of October.

Such sites have been variously identified as the result of either archaeological fieldwork and air photography, or through the study of place-names and documentary evidence: for instance, in Cumbria five place-name elements exist which may be indicative of former shielings – the Norse *aergi* meaning a shieling or hill pasture, *saetr* and *skal* which are synonymous with *aergi*, and the English versions, *skaling* and *schele*. The latter, although frequent as *shiels* and shield in the northern Pennines and Northumberland, is rare in the Lake District. In Cornwall the name *havos*, 'summer dwelling' indicates shielings, as it also does in Wales

In England most shielings occur in upland areas such as the Lake District, eastern Cumbria, Northumberland and western County Durham, while examples have also been recorded in locations like the Isle of Man, Cornwall and Dartmoor. They are commonly documented in the Scottish uplands and islands and transhumance involving the use of shielings has a complex history in the British Isles.

In some areas, for example on the Isle of Lewis, villagers journeyed to the moors with their cattle until very recently. Records from England, however, suggest transhumance ended by the post-medieval period (see below, Chronology). In Cornwall and on Dartmoor the period of dairying transhumance appears to have ended at the close of the early medieval period.

1 Description

Shielings and Bastles (Ramm et al 1970) distinguishes between shielings as 'huts without associated enclosures, found singly or in groups' and farmsteads in which the buildings are larger and associated with a yard or enclosure. It has also been suggested that shielings are sometimes defined by an enclosure (either a dry stone wall or bank and ditch), generally ovoid and set in areas of rough pasture without associated tracks (Figure 2).

Shielings tend to be sited by streams which served as routes into the uplands or along those boundaries of the territory allotted for grazing which were further from the permanent dwellings of the summer migrants. Most are usually of dry-stone construction but potential sites with turf foundations have been recorded on the Otterburn Army Range in Northumberland National Park and these are not unknown from other areas.

The majority of shielings are rectangular in plan, varying in length from 5.7 m to 14.0 m and in width from less than 3.0 m to 8.3 m in northern England, shorter and narrower in Cornwall. Numerous sites are square or nearly square in plan and of these some may have exceptionally thick walls and some may have rounded corners. These merge into sub-rectangular or oval forms. Examples are known from upper Eskdale, Cumbria, and from the Isle of Man and on Bodmin Moor. Exterior walls generally range from 0.7 m to 0.8 m in thickness while partition walls, where present, are the same or less (Figure 3).

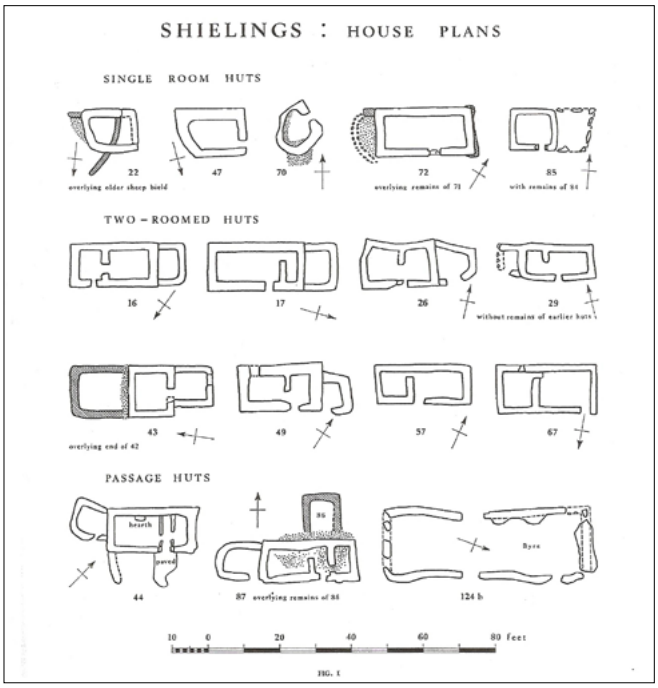

Figure 2
Variant shieling house plans.

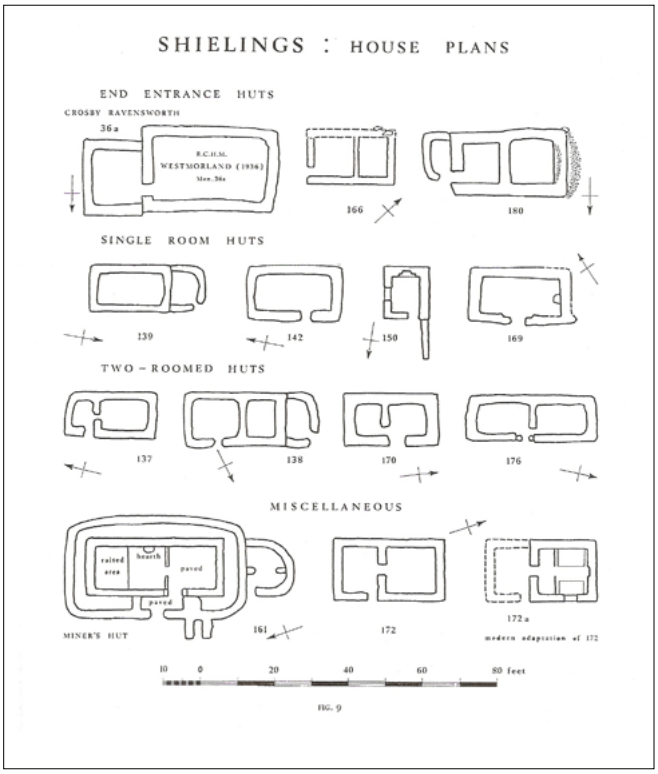

Figure 3
Shieling house plans in Cumbria.

Square huts and the smaller rectangular huts were generally one-roomed. In two-roomed shielings, the outer door often opens into a small room, either a vestibule or store room, with a larger room beyond. In others the door opens into a large room containing a small inner room which may have acted as a sleeping space. In some examples the two rooms may be of equal size while others may have rooms on either side of a central passage. Most of the shielings on the Otterburn Range conform to the dimensions and appearance of sites recorded in Shielings and Bastles. Regional variation to the accepted typology may be observable in Teesdale, County Durham (Figure 4).

Shielings in northern England often survive to the full height of their side walls – between 1.7 m and 1.9 m although gable ends may be up to 1 m higher. Exceptions to these dimensions are rare. One example at Ousby, between Penrith and Alston, survives to over 3 m at the gable end and nearly 2 m on the side walls. Most rectangular shielings seem to have had gabled roofs and the roof covering was probably of turf, rushes or heather.

Typically, shielings contained a single entrance close to the middle of a long wall. This may simply be a gap in the wall, although occasionally jambs and stone lintels survive. The doorway is usually

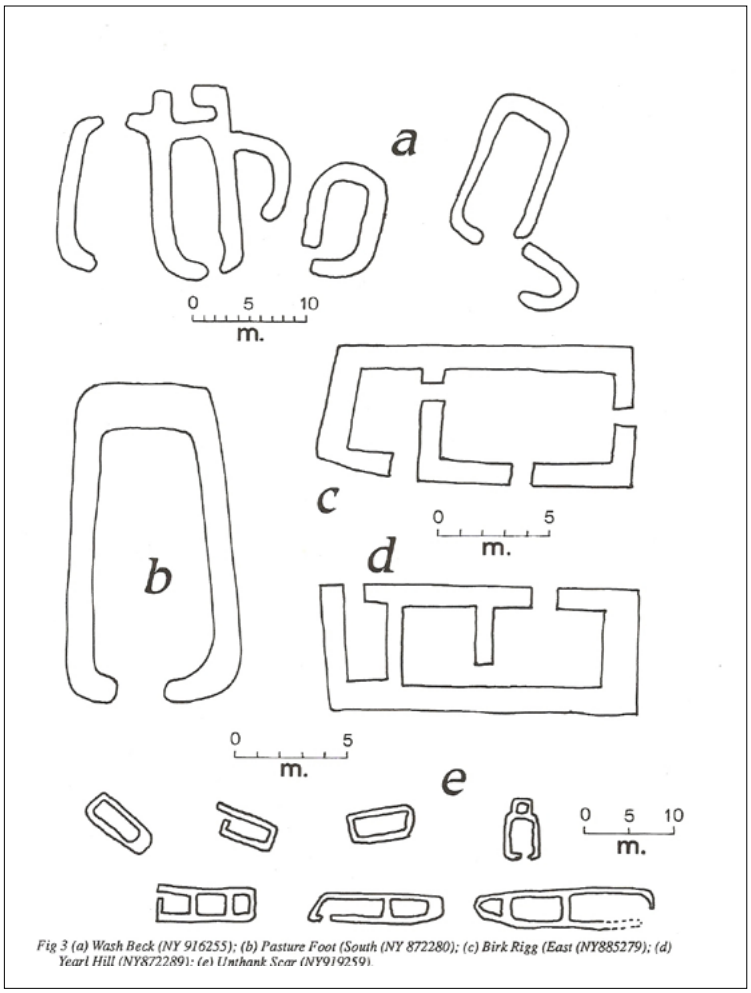

Fig 3 (a) Wash Beck (NY 916255); (b) Pasture Foot (South (NY 872280); (c) Birk Rigg (East (NY885279); (d) Yearl Hill (NY872289); (e) Unthank Scar (NY919259)

Figure 4
Selected shieling house plans in Teesdale County Durham.

in the south wall, even when the north wall is better protected from the weather. Windows are rare. One example in a hut in the White Lyne measured 0.42 m x 0.39 m and splayed internally to a width of 0.54 m. The jambs had shallow sockets presumably for a bar holding the wooden shutter in place. In contrast a well-preserved hut on the Kings Water at Tinkler Crags (Cumbria) has no windows and only a small hole immediately below the eaves (Figure 5).

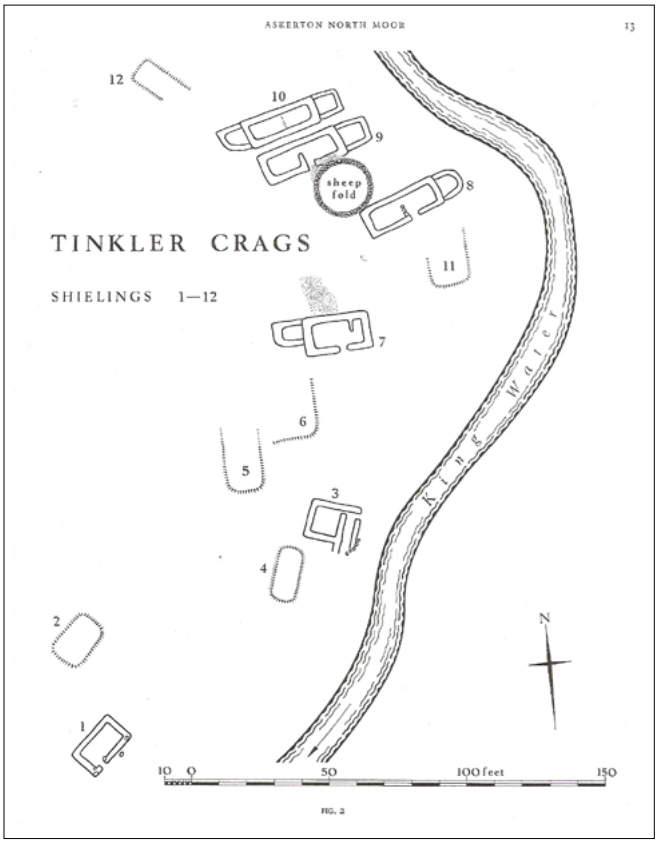

Figure 5
Shielings at Tinklers Crags, Cumbria. Plan shows two potential phases of construction.

The interiors of shielings, when investigated, have produced little evidence. Hearths are one of the few common factors.

Nine types of shieling can be recognised:

1. Square, one-roomed
2. Square, two-roomed
3. Square, passage huts
4. Rectangular one-roomed
5. Rectangular two-roomed
6. Rectangular passage huts
7. Ovoid one-roomed
8. Ovoid two-roomed
9. Ovoid passage huts

2 Chronology

Historical documents suggest that the use of shielings was mainly confined to the period up to the 16th century.

References to shielings in the Forest of Lowes, in Northumberland, date back to 1171, and an occurrence of planned shielings of about 1300 has been recorded on the Bishop of Durham's land holdings in Upper Weardale, County Durham.

Absolute dates from excavations are limited by the lack of fieldwork on shieling sites, particularly in England. At Block Eary, Isle of Man, a coin of between 1135 and 1141 was recovered; at Castle Nick on Hadrian's Wall palaeomagnetic dates from a hearth suggested a range between 1500 and 1525; and excavations at the Bogle Hole, also on Hadrian's Wall, produced a radiocarbon date of 1451 – 1659 (320+/- 45 BP – AA 33126). Excavations at the site of Alnhamsheles in Northumberland examined a two-phase stone built long house on a site first documented in the inquisition post-mortem of John de Vesci in 1265; that produced pottery dating from 1200–1500. Excavations at Memmerkirk, also in Northumberland, suggested a 14th century origin for the site, while a date of 1650-1670 was suggested by a clay pipe find from a site at Whitelyne Common in Cumbria.

Although Camden describes active shielings in the North Tyne Valley in 1586, a survey of the Lake District in 1578 contained only one specific reference to shielings. The clause from the Alston Moor Paine (Cumbria) relating to transhumance was removed in 1597 suggesting that shieling activities probably stopped around that time. Similarly the practice may well have ceased in the north Pennines by the mid-17th century. In northern Cumbria areas were still being exploited using the shieling system in the mid-17th century, but again this probably ended soon after. All of this would tend to confirm a broad chronological range for shieling sites in northern England spanning the 12th to 17th centuries.

Possible shielings were excavated beneath longhouses at Hound Tor on Dartmoor and in Cornwall a small sub-rectangular hut excavated at Stencoose produced 5th to 7th century dates. Numerous huts on Bodmin Moor which appear to be shielings are early in local chronologies. Place-names and historical references place transhumance in Cornwall and on Dartmoor squarely in the early medieval period. It is also likely that transhumance was practiced in many other parts of southern and eastern Britain, using fenlands as well as uplands.

3 Development of the Asset Type

As noted above, little excavation work has been carried out on shieling sites in England, though much has been done on sites in Scotland. Limited work suggests the re-use of preferred locations as at Mound C, Block Eary, Isle of Man. Here a large hearth pre-dated the first shielings and the succession of shielings overlying it also produced hearths in the same location, generally with two or more paving slabs adjacent to them.

Field survey has shown a variety of relative chronological sequences in various parts of the English uplands. At Tinkler Crags in the Kingwater Valley in Cumbria, for example, at least two phases of pre-19th century shieling activity have been demonstrated. Similarly at Shiels Brae, Bewcastle in the valley of the River White Lynne, Cumbria, at least three phases of shieling construction, indicated by overlapping huts have been recorded and fragments of clay pipe dating to about 1650-1670 were recovered from paving stones associated with the hearth of the latest hut at the site.

In several locations potential midden deposits have been identified and these would have tremendous potential for providing more detailed information about shieling activities (Figure 6).

Clearly future excavations have the potential to evaluate ideas relating to potential regional variation in shieling development and changing settlement morphology over time.

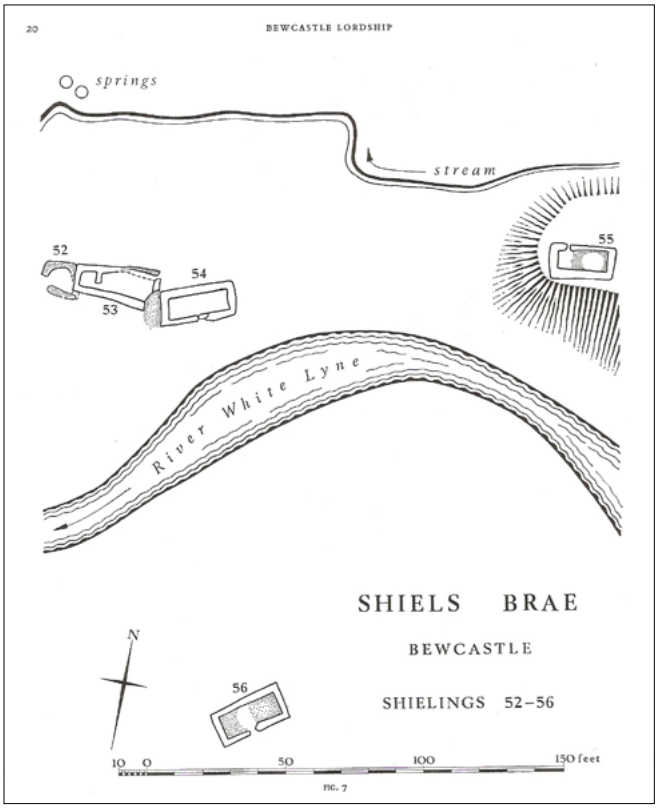

Figure 6
Shielings at Shiels Brae, Bewcastle in the valley of the River White Lynne, Cumbria. Plan shows at least three phases of construction.

4 Associations

The term shieling applies to the hut or shelter in the first instance and not to the pastures that were exploited or the custom of 'shieling' itself. Medieval references using the word simply imply the existence of huts and usually (but not necessarily) the custom of transhumance.

This raises the issue of the nature of 'shieling' itself. Were the exploited pastures 'territorial' and linked to particular winter settlements or groups of settlements? How were upland and lowland territories linked and how was the process organised at a social level?

A variety of organisational structures seems to have underpinned the shieling system in the north of England. Place names on Askerton North Moor in Cumbria suggest pasture land being allocated to discrete manors within Baronies and townships within manors, for instance Brampton Law (pasture for the manor of Brampton) and Cammock Loans (pasture allocated to a township within the manor) (Figure 7).

The village of Brampton held shieling land some 10 miles distant from the village. Similarly, it is thought that the Bewcastle Fells in Cumbria were first used for shieling by the Lords of Burgh on Solway and that this involved the movement of people and animals over some 15 miles. Distances were similar in Cornwall but greater in Devon.

In 1597 the shielings of Tynedale (Northumberland) were said to be the chief source of income for farmers in the region, and the 1604 *Survey of the Debateable and Border Lands* also indicates that they were important to the region's economy. The topography and the extent of permanent settlement in the region, however, prevented the development of large tracts of shieling land for a group of manors belonging to one barony. As a result shielings were allocated to the tenants of the nearest farms. This practice could still involve the movement of animals over several miles, for instance farms north of the village of Wark had shielings in Haining, some seven miles distant.

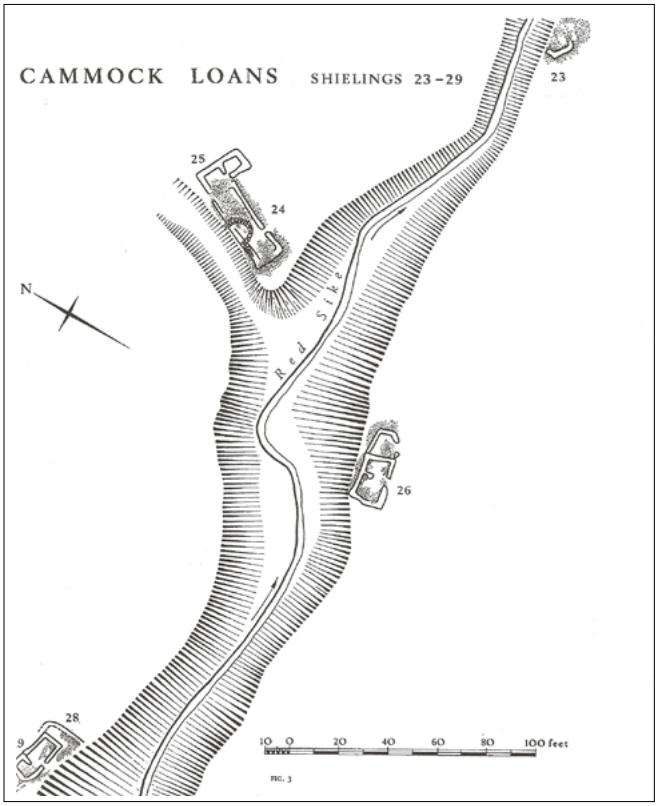

Figure 7
Shielings at Cammock Loans, Cumbria.

In Redesdale (Northumberland) pastures were held in common in the 17th century but the huts were in individual ownership: 'each man knoweth his Shieleding steed, and they sheylde together by Surnames'. The area around the manor of Elsdon was divided into 'Ellesden Wintersteeds' and 'Ellesden sheylding grounds' and the latter were used by 'the whole inhabitants of the Mannor'.

These references aside, there is little direct evidence for the detailed social structure associated with the shieling system. Field survey in northern England has largely concentrated on recording the remains of the shieling huts in isolation, and much less attention has been paid to the sites' wider landscape context.

The following account from Comunn Eachdraidh Nis – Ness Historical Society gives an interesting insight into life at a shieling site. The McLeod family were the last to use the shielings at Borve on Lewis. Their last visit was in 1946.

'The usual time to go to the shieling was after the 15th May when the village was cleared of all stock and sent to the common grazing. There were no fences on the crofts at that time to protect what was sown or planted. The cattle were kept out at the shieling until August then they were taken into the enclosed winter grazing known as the 'fence'. We were the last family in Melbost, Borve to regularly go to the shieling – that was the summer of 1946. We had four dairy cows and a calf.

The shieling was a simple construction: It was about twelve to fourteen feet in length and about six to eight feet wide. The bottom half of the inner wall was built with stone, the rest of the wall was built with heather sods and the outer walls were also built with heather sods.

Stones for walls were scarce on the moor. The roof had a wooden ridge-pole with timber rafters. The roof was then covered with turf sods to make it water-tight. There were recesses built in the bottom half of the inside wall: they were known as 'uinneagan' (windows).

This was where the milk and other dairy products were stored. The food was also kept there. The bed was at the one end and an open fire at the other end. The door was near the fire, there were no windows, there was an opening in the roof above the hearth which was called 'farlas', this is where the smoke went out. There was always a turf standing on end supported by a piece of wood, it was kept on the windward side to give better ventilation. Daylight also came through this opening.

There was a 'muran', sods cut and placed across the shieling where the bed was, this was used for sitting on and acted as a sort of bedboard, it was called the 'cailleach'. Furniture was very scant, a wooden box acted as a table and also for storing the pails. The bottom of the bed was filled with dry heather and fianach – moorgrass – put on top of the heather beds were very comfortable. The food on the shieling was always something that did not take any length of time in cooking as there was usually only the one pot. It consisted of oat bread, kippers, eggs, salt herring and salt fish. There was plenty of cream and creamy milk to go with the food. The milk had an appetising taste which you could only get on the shieling, it is known as 'Blas an Sliabh' (taste of the moor).

The bothan was a crude sort of a bothy for keeping calves in before they would stray and get bogged down. At every shieling there was a long slab stone erected upright and firmly in the ground, it was called 'clach tachas nam bo' (the cow's scratching stone').

The cows, after they were milked, used to scratch their noses and necks on it.

Work on the shieling was more or less the same routine every day, getting up at six thirty in the morning, getting the fire going and preparing the breakfast. Before starting milking the cows, you had to set the milk in enamel basins and the fresh milk you took home was bottled, the sour milk was in tin pails manufactured by Peter, the tinker in Barvas – 'Padruig Sheonaidh'.

The cream was also in a tin pail of a smaller size. They were made leak proof with an iimidal' secured over the top with string. It did not matter how rough the terrain you walked over, they never leaked. The imidal' was a sheep's skin with the wool removed from it, it was always kept in salty water to keep fresh and pliable. You scrubbed all the pails, cutlery and crockery down at the river with sand and sprigs of heather.

Before you left for home you fed the calves and banked the fire with peat and peat sods, the fire was kept burning twenty four hours a day. The boys carried all the produce from the shieling in hessian bags and the girls used the creels. You left for home about eight o'clock, the route was following the Galson river to Auigh Mhuraidh Chalum and then you veered westward to a landmark called 'Cape', it was like a cabin built with peat sods, you rested here for a while before proceeding on the next stage of the journey which was still westerly until you came to Alt Grandal. You followed the burn until you came to the main road and then home.

After you got home, croft work had to be done, also you had to go to the shore for seaweed which was made into small bundles called 'paisgans'; you took this out to the shieling in the evening and gave it to the cows when you were milking them. The cattle were very fond of this – probably because of a lack of salt and other proteins in the diet. Sometimes after getting to the shieling in the evening you would have to herd the cows for milking. You always went barefooted as footwear was of not much use on the moor. Some of the older women wore 'ossinans; this was long woollen hose with the soles cut off them.

The Taigh Earraich (Spring house) was of bigger construction than a shieling, the idea of it, as the name states, was going out to the moor in the spring with the cattle when fodder was scarce. There was room at the end of the taigh earraich for taking the milking cows in and keeping them in overnight. The Gaelic name for a cluster of shielings was 'geraidh'. All you can see of these shielings now is ruins covered in heather and moorgrass.'

5 Further Reading

General surveys of the subject, albeit mainly based on historic sources, are I D Whyte's paper 'Shielings and the Upland Pastoral Economy of the Lake District in Medieval and Early Modern Times', pages 103-17 in J R Baldwin and I D Whyte (eds), *The Scandinavians in Cumbria* (1985), and two books by Angus Winchester; *Landscape and Society in Medieval Cumbria* (1987) (especially pages 92-6) and *The Harvest of the Hills: Rural Life in Northern England and the Scottish Borders, 1400-1700* (2000).

In 1972 Philip Dixon produced a thought-provoking review of *Shielings and Bastles* (see below) that still deserves serious consideration for its wider ranging implications: 'Shielings and Bastles: A Reconsideration of Some Problems', *Archaeologia Aeliana* 4th Series 50 (1972), 249-58.

Local and site-specific reports of note include the seminal book by H Ramm, R W McDowall and E Mercer, *Shielings and Bastles* (1970) (especially pages 9-43), which deals with shielings in Cumbria and Northumberland.

Other important early work was carried out by Peter Gelling on the Isle of Man: 'Medieval Shielings in the Isle of Man', *Medieval Archaeology* 6-7 (1964), 156-72.

The contributions by Richardson and Fairbairn and Robertson on sites in the Cumbrian uplands are also instructive: G Richardson, 'Kings Stables: An Early Shieling on Black Lyne Common, Bewcastle', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* 79 (1979), 19-27; R A Fairbairn and A F Robertson, 'Whitley Shielings in Gilderdale near Alston', *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th Series 36 (2007), 257 – 66.

In 1992 Denis Coggins produced a good survey of shieling sites in Teesdale (County Durham) in which he challenged some of the accepted typological classifications of shieling sites: 'Shielings and Farmsteads: Early Rectangular Buildings in Upper Teesdale', *Durham Archaeological Journal* 8, 77-83.

For more southerly parts see H Fox (ed) *Seasonal Settlement* (1996); H Fox *Dartmoor's Alluring Uplands, Transhumance in the Middle Ages* (2012); P Herring, 'Shadows of Ghosts' Early Medieval Transhumants in Cornwall', in S Turner and B Silvester (eds) *Life in Medieval Landscapes* (2012), 89 -105.

A forthcoming publication by Comunn Eachdraidh Nis – Ness Historical Society, with Acair Publishing, will cover the placenames of North Lewis and include a chapter about shielings concerning the Lewis transhumance tradition.

6 Where to Get Advice

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7 Acknowledgments

Comunn Eachdraidh Nis – Ness Historical Society – http://www.cenonline.org/

Cover: Shielings at Shiels Brae, Bewcastle, as Figure 6

Figure 1: Source: © Dr. Rob Young

Figure 2: Source: H G Ramm et al., *Shielings and Bastles*. RCHM (E) 1970. Fig. 1, 11.

Figure 3: Source: H G Ramm et al., *Shielings and Bastles*. RCHM (E) 1970. Fig. 9, 37.

Figure 4: Source: D Coggins, 'Shielings and Farmsteads: Early Rectangular Buildings in Upper Teesdale', *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 1992, 8, Fig. 3, 80.

Figure 5: Source: H G Ramm et al., *Shielings and Bastles*. RCHM (E) 1970. Fig. 2, 13.

Figure 6: Source: H G Ramm et al., *Shielings and Bastles*. RCHM (E) 1970. Fig. 7, 20.

Figure 7: Source: H G Ramm et al., *Shielings and Bastles*. RCHM (E) 1970. Fig. 3, 15.

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