

A more detailed history of Dubwath Silver Meadows

Dubwath Silver Meadows is surrounded by hills. The rain that falls on this huge area ends up here (see map below). This makes Dubwath Silver Meadows very important - it provides somewhere for excess water to go during extremely wet periods. It also helps to improve the

quality of water in Bassenthwaite Lake by filtering sediment and nutrients out of the water before it enters the lake.

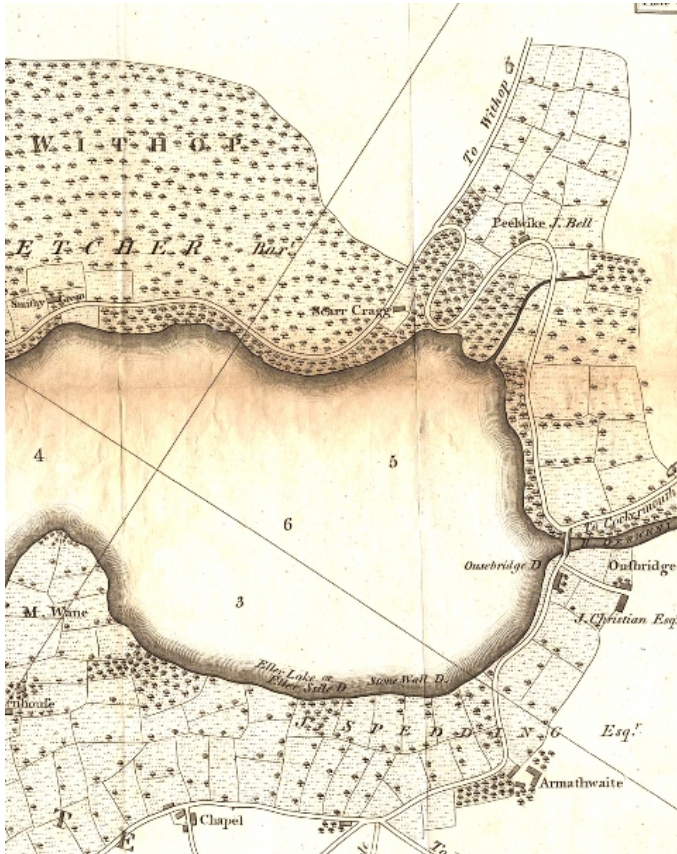


Some 10-12,000 years ago, this area was under a thick blanket of ice, with little or no vegetation at all in what is now Cumbria. The ice gradually melted and a number of large lakes formed from the meltwater in the deep valley bottoms scraped out by the glaciers.

In the upper Derwent valley one huge lake formed - what we call Bassenthwaite Lake and Derwentwater formed one continuous body of water, including the area of Dubwath Silver Meadows (the area now separating the two lakes was under water). Over the centuries, erosion of the surrounding hillsides and the growth of vegetation in the warmer climate led to the build up of sediments and layers of peat (un-decayed plant material), so that the huge lake gradually became smaller and eventually formed the two lakes we know today. Flooding in 2009 and 2015 re-united the lakes for a short time!

Much of the land, except for the highest fell tops and the wettest areas, was colonised by woodland - oak, ash, wychelm, hazel, birch, rowan, and bird cherry in the drier areas, alder and willow in the wetter parts. Open areas became scarcer except where large grazing animals - wild ox, moose, red deer - managed to keep the encroaching woodland at bay (with the exception of red deer, these animals are now long extinct in Britain).

Humans were also part of this landscape, as hunters and gatherers, but our impacts on it probably did not become really significant until the beginning of farming about 5,000 years ago. Even then, the woodland may have remained fairly intact until colonisation of the Lake District by Norse people (actually from Ireland but descended from Vikings from Norway) some 1200 years ago. These people really started large-scale woodland clearance and the basic pattern of open land and woodland we see today (with the exception of modern, mainly coniferous, plantations) had taken shape by the early middle ages (AD 1000 - 1200).



The map to the left shows the land use and ownership during the late 18th century.

[Beware, west is at the top]

The pattern and diversity of habitats at Dubwath Silver Meadows probably dates from this period and reflects the land use practices of that time.

The local people of Embleton and Wythop would have used the best land in the valley (well drained and fertile) for growing crops and hay.

From spring until harvest time, the village livestock would have been kept out of these fields and put onto the surrounding fells or onto those

parts of the valley too wet to grow crops - like Dubwath Silver Meadows.

So what is now the reserve would have been grazed in the spring and summer months by villagers' livestock and also used by the local people as a valuable source of fuel (wood and peat), game and other resources such as wild plants for culinary and medicinal use. By using the land in this way, the local people prevented colonisation of the wetland by trees, shrubs and coarser vegetation, allowing diverse plant communities and their associated animal life to develop.

Unfortunately, this traditional use of the land fell into decline probably during the 19th century. This began to allow trees to colonise the open wetland habitats again, threatening much of the plant and animal wildlife. This remained the situation until quite recently when, fortunately, a new government-funded grant scheme (Environmental Stewardship) was made available to help farmers manage their land in a more wildlife-friendly way. As a result of this scheme, light grazing by traditional breeds of cattle (Belted Galloway or Long-horn cattle) and sheep (Herdwick) has now been re-introduced. These breeds are able to thrive on a diet of wild plants. This pattern of grazing is allowing the diverse plant and animal wildlife of open habitats to flourish once again.