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Lin in the Landscape

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Although archaeology has revealed that linen has been produced in north-west England for many centuries,¹ this textile and the processes necessary for its production have really received very little attention in the literature.² The basic raw material for linen is flax, *Linum usitatissimum*, which could have been grown almost anywhere in the country,³ difficulties being experienced only if there was a lengthy wet period in late summer when the flax should have been harvested. If top quality flax was required, it had to be harvested before the seed had ripened; if coarser yarn was acceptable, the flax could be left for up to two weeks so that the seeds were ripe before the crop was pulled up.

The flax would then have to be 'retted' (soaked in water) for between ten and fourteen days to make it easier to separate the bast fibres from the outside skin and the inner woody core. This process took place in retting pools, where the sheaves of flax ('beets') would be soaked and turned in slow-moving water. At the end of the retting process the sheaves would be raked out and put on banks to dry before being carted away for further processing.

This is a shortened and revised version of a paper given on 31 March 1990 at the 22nd Annual Study Conference organized by the Council for Name Studies in Great Britain and Ireland, held at the College of Ripon and York St John, Ripon.

¹ B. J. N. Edwards, Lancashire County Archaeologist, has informed me that a British Museum analysis of fragments of charred cloth found when the Bleasdale Stone Circle (probably Bronze Age in date) was excavated some years ago showed that the textile was linen.

² Diana Winterbotham, 'Flax—a forgotten crop', *Lancashire Local Historian*, 4 (1986), 2–5.

³ John Turner, *Linseed Law* (Suffolk, 1987), 1–19, gives details of the history of flax growing, demonstrating that it could be grown in all parts of Britain.

Recent work has shown that evidence still survives in the landscape for this retting process,⁴ which could involve a complex system of watercourses, pools and sluices, many of which, although first mentioned in twelfth- and thirteenth-century documents, can still be identified in the modern landscape. These retting-pool sites have common characteristics. They are usually on flat land, close to a river, but utilizing small streams which have been deliberately channelled to provide a controlled water supply. The pools often have raised banks for drying the retted flax. Unlike medieval fish-ponds, with which they might be confused, retting pools are usually located away from settlements because of the pollution caused to the water supply, and also because of the smell. They are also often associated with major demesne holdings, both secular and ecclesiastic.

Sometimes the precise location of retting systems can be deduced from early maps, as at Grindleton, near Clitheroe (grid reference SD 759457). The flax retting system in this township, on the banks of the Ribble near Fields House Farm, was identified because an estate map dated 1765 included a reference to *Mean Flax Pools*,⁵ with the mid-nineteenth-century tithe records for Grindleton including fields known as Flax Spoils.⁶ At Newton-in-Bowland (SD 697505) the existence of the retting pools was only revealed when a local farmer, preparing a temporary car park for the local agricultural show, filled some ditches with soil to support railway sleepers to make crossing-points for vehicles to get access. As might have been expected, the weather for the show was appalling; there was a rapid run-off of water from the fells into the blocked ditches. The water 'backed up' into some of the former pools, revealing their existence (Map 1).

Such fortuitous revelations cannot be relied upon, however, and a method had to be found which would enable research on retting-pool systems to be carried out in a more systematic way. Mr M. Davies-Shiel had demonstrated how field-names like Walk Mill, Tenter Hey, -Bank and Kiln might well lead to the discovery of woollen processing sites,⁷ and it seemed possible that field-names containing the

⁴ M. C. Higham, 'Some evidence for 12th- and 13th-century linen and woollen textile processing', *Medieval Archaeology*, 33 (1989), 38-52.

⁵ Lancashire Record Office (hereafter L.R.O.): DDB - Plan of the Parker Estates (Lang), 1765.

⁶ L.R.O. PR3031/4/3.

⁷ M. Davies-Shiel, 'A late medieval industry, part 1—the making of potash

place-name element *lin* (from OE *līn*, ON *līn* 'flax') might be used in a similar way to indicate flax-retting sites. However, when the northern volumes of the English Place-Name Society were checked,⁸ with one exception, *Lyneflete* (a stream where flax was retted),⁹ it was found that all field-names with the element *Lin-* are supposed to indicate places where flax had been grown, not retted.

As Lillands ('linen lands') in Waddington (SD 736436),¹⁰ and Lineholme in Rathmell (SD 598805)¹¹ both still showed evidence for retting-pool systems (Map 2), despite the fact that the Rathmell field-name was first recorded (as *Linholm*) in the thirteenth century, it seemed likely that at least some of the *lin* field-names, although stated in the EPNS volumes to indicate where flax was grown, might more correctly indicate where early retting systems might have been located. If sufficient evidence for a positive correlation between *lin* place-names and retting systems could be shown to exist, it might then be possible to suggest which elements compounded with *lin* were most likely to be indicators of retting areas.

All references to *lin* field-names given in the EPNS volumes for Westmorland were collated. The Tithe Apportionment Schedules and Maps for the relevant townships were examined,¹² and, where possible, the fields were located. The actual sites were then visited. A similar exercise was carried out for parts of the former West Riding of Yorkshire, with researches concentrating on Ewcross and West Staincliffe Wapentakes. As Ekwall does not give field-names for Lancashire,¹³ and the Cumberland volumes contain none in *Lin-* that can be located on the ground, in these counties it was only possible to extract settlement- and minor names in *lin* and visit the relevant areas.

for soap in Lakeland', and 'Part 2—the ashburners', *Transactions of the Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society*, 2nd series, 72 (1972), 85-111, and 74 (1974), 33-64.

⁸ *PNCumberland*, I-III, EPNS XX-XXIII (Cambridge, 1950-52); *PNWestm.*, I-II, EPNS XLII-III (Cambridge, 1967); *PNYorksWR*, VI, EPNS XXXXV (Cambridge, 1961).

⁹ Windermere Township, *PNWestm.*, I, 198.

¹⁰ *PNYorksWR*, VI, 200.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹² I am grateful to the staff of the Cumbria Record Office, Kendal, for their willing help with the tithe records.

¹³ E. Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (Manchester, 1922).

After all the sites (more than 50) had been visited and photographed,¹⁴ it was possible to analyse the results to see if any pattern emerged. The element *-lands*, as in Lillands, poses problems. As stated earlier, there is evidence for retting at Waddington, and fields named Lillands at Draughton near Skipton¹⁵ also show traces of a retting system (Map 2). In both cases, however, the name is also applied to other fields which do not appear to have retting systems within them. It is possible that *Lilland* names were also applied to fields where the finished linen cloth was laid out in the sun and wind to improve its colour—an alternative, and probably earlier, name for a ‘bleach green’?

Field-names containing elements associated with flat land by river, meadow or water—*-fit*, *-flatt*, *-flete*, *-holme* (sometimes occurring as *-ham*), and *-wath*—showed evidence, as might have been expected, for deliberately-constructed retting systems. To cite every occurrence would be somewhat tedious, but good examples have been found in Westmorland at Winton (Linehams), Hoff (Line Garth, formerly *the Lyne Holme*), Sockbridge (Lineham), and Crosby Garrett (Lime flat, *Line-flatt* 1704).¹⁶ This last example, like Linelands in Hilton township and the Flax Spoils in Grindleton, suggests that the area of the retting system was sometimes held by several tenants. This is probably because the land by the rivers could be used to provide early grazing in the spring, with the land manured ready for a hay crop in late July or early August. It would then be possible to close the sluices to allow the ponds to fill, and then ret the flax. After the retted flax had drained and dried, the land would again be available for grazing in the autumn. The multiplicity of tenants in some of the retting areas no doubt

¹⁴ Some sites, such as the one at Crosby Garrett (NY 728098), were visited on more than one occasion, to check them under different light and ‘crop’ (i.e. grass) conditions. The sites at Hilton and Burton Manor are within the area of M.O.D. firing ranges, and were visited once, on Boxing Day, when the ranges were closed.

¹⁵ Lillands Beck is the boundary between Halton East township and the township of Draughton, and *PNYorksWR*, VI, 70, includes Lillands under Halton East, referring to the 1847 Tithe Award. When this was checked (PRO, 43-187) the name was not there. It does, however, occur in the Draughton Tithe Award (North Yorkshire County Record Office, +1793).

¹⁶ *PNWestm.*, II, 29 (NY 769116), 100 (NY 661153), 209 (NY 494276) and 41.

represents their shares in what was not only a set of retting pools, but also a common hay meadow.

West Riding examples include not only Grindleton and Newton, but also Burton-in-Lonsdale, where the field-names Upper-, Middle- and Lower Lyne Holme are found with the retting pool system still recognizable, albeit in very poor condition.¹⁷ This is not surprising, considering its apparent age, for *Le Lynholme* was part of the relatively small area of land held in demesne by John de Mowbray in 1368.¹⁸

Lynnall in Middleton township, West Derby Hundred, Lancashire (*lin + ball*), needs to be dealt with separately in this discussion.¹⁹ Instead of the well-organized systems discussed earlier, it has a shallow pool, rather tucked away in a naturally steep-sided but open-floored hollow which could well have been used for retting in the past. As bogs such as Askham Bog²⁰ were evidently used for the retting of hemp (*Cannabis sativa*), which, like flax, and indeed nettles, needs the separation of the bast fibres from the other plant parts, a natural shallow pool in a nook or corner, or even in a *linslac* (ON *slakki* ‘hollow’), as in Sedbergh,²¹ could well have been used for the retting of flax, even if there is little evidence in the landscape other than the pool to support the idea.

This research would seem to suggest that place-name elements compounded with *lin* might conveniently be divided into four main groups (Appendix 1), the first two indicating where flax was grown,²² and the third group—elements associated with enclosures—being applied either to fields where flax was grown or closes where flax was stored and/or processed into yarn. That the fourth group, containing elements associated with flat land by river, meadow or water, can be shown to have this association with retting systems would seem to

¹⁷ West Yorkshire Archives, Sheepscar Library, BD56.

¹⁸ PRO, C 135/212/1.

¹⁹ Ekwall, *PNLancs*, p. 98.

²⁰ J. Greig, ‘Plant Resources’, in *The Countryside of Medieval England*, edited by G. Astill and A. Grant (Oxford, 1988), pp. 108-27 (p. 122).

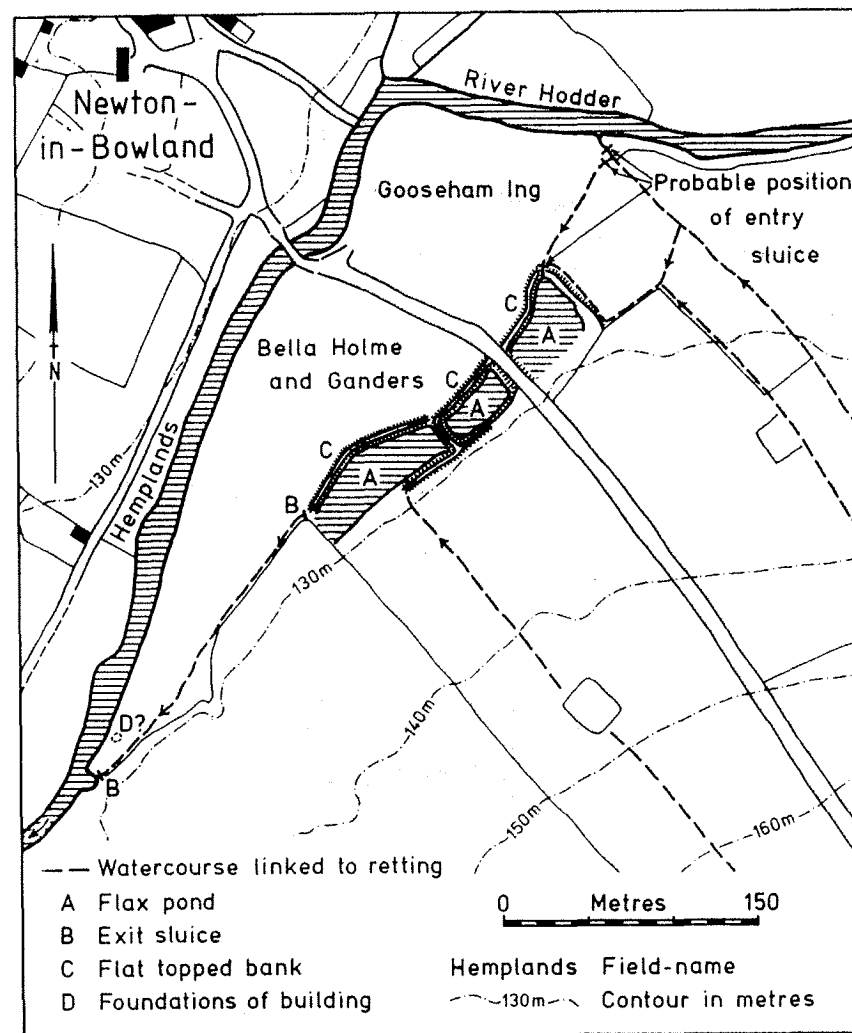
²¹ *PNYorksWR*, VI, 272.

²² There are two farms called Bluegrass in Westmorland, one of which has a field called Linegarth (*PNWestm.*, II, 19 and 75). There are also several examples of ‘blue’ in field names. It is tempting to speculate that these names commemorate the blue flowers of flax, fields of which are quite spectacular when in bloom.

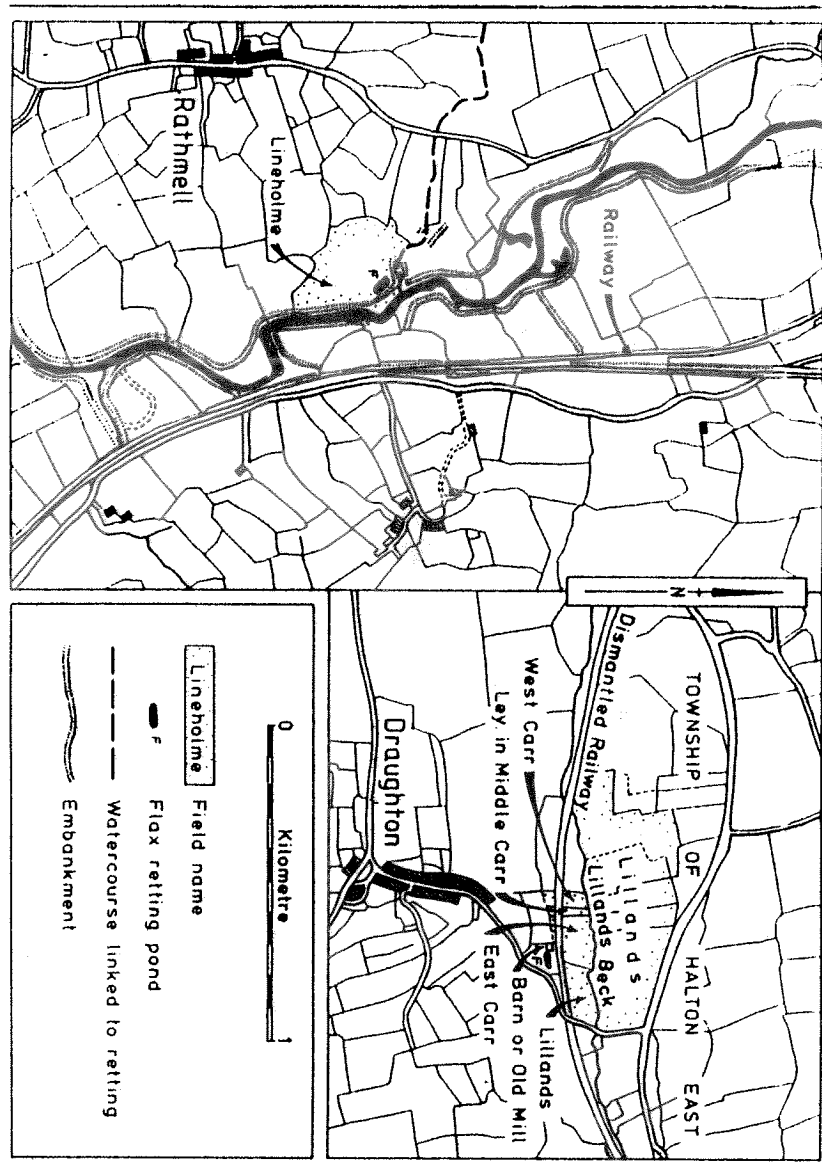
suggest that field-names which come into this category, rather than being included in the general description as 'places where flax was grown', could be more correctly defined as 'places where flax was retted'.

Appendix 1: Elements compounded with *lin*

- (a) Elements associated with arable cultivation: *-acre, -bank, -dale, -land, -rood, -rigg, -flatt*
 (b) Elements associated with clearance and possible arable cultivation: *-grassing, -ley, -royd, -thwaite*
 (c) Elements associated with enclosures: *-close, -croft, -garth, -yard*
 (d) Elements associated with flat land by river, meadow or water: *-fit, -flete, -halgh, -holme (-ham), -wath*
 (e) Other elements: *-slakki* 'hollow', *-skáli* 'temporary hut', *-stoc* 'place', *-(v)rá* 'nook, corner'.



Map 1: plan of the retting pond system at Newton-in-Bowland, Yorkshire (West Riding).



Map 2

(upper) Lineholme in Rathmell township, Yorkshire (West Riding).
 (lower) Evidence for flax processing, Draughton and Halton East townships, Yorkshire (West Riding).

The Medieval Boundary of Burton Chase: Identification and Implications

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At an inquest held at Boroughbridge in 1307, two of the King's Commissioners sat with a jury of twelve men, six of whom appear from their surnames to be local to the Burton-in-Lonsdale area, to consider 'by what metes and bounds' the ancestor of Sir John de Moubray held the free chases of Burton-in-Lonsdale and Nidderdale, Yorkshire.¹ The Burton bounds are set out first (Appendix 1), and follow a predictable pattern, with the boundary points being taken in a clockwise sequence, beginning and ending at the *caput* of Burton-in-Lonsdale, with the linear distance covered by the boundary in excess of 100 km. Because of the length of the boundary, it cannot be said that the most arduous section was done first, as often happens with township boundary perambulations, as any 'beating of the bounds' of Burton Chase would have taken considerably longer than one day.²

There are only twenty-five separate points mentioned, which, considering the distances involved, seems quite few. The number does, however, appear almost excessive when compared with the four mentioned in the *Quo Warranto* proceedings of 1293, which enquired by what right John's father, Roger, held the Chase.³ That much of the

This is a summary of a more detailed paper, illustrated by slides of points on the boundary, given on 6 April 1991 at the 23rd Annual Study Conference organized by the Council for Name Studies in Great Britain and Ireland, held at the University of Leicester. It is hoped that the complete text, with discussion of identifications and full grid references, together with additional material, will be published in the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* in 1994.

¹ 1. *Yorkshire Inquisitions*, Vol. IV, edited by W. Brown, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, XXXVII (Leeds, 1906), 148-49.

² For the purposes of this investigation, the boundary was walked *in toto* and, excluding repeat visits for certain stretches, took at least two full weeks.

³ *Placita de Quo Warranto*, ed. W. Illingworth (London, 1818), pp. 218-19.