

“He scratched those
words on the rocks”

Norman Nicholson and Norse Heritage in 20th-
Century Lakeland

Jack Threlfall Hartley, University of Oxford

‘Rugged, remote, northern, fascinating, complex, dark, highly independent, rich in Viking history; Cumbria is Britain’s very own Scandinavia – in the sense of myth, magic and mountains, if not flatpack furniture, herrings and Abba.’



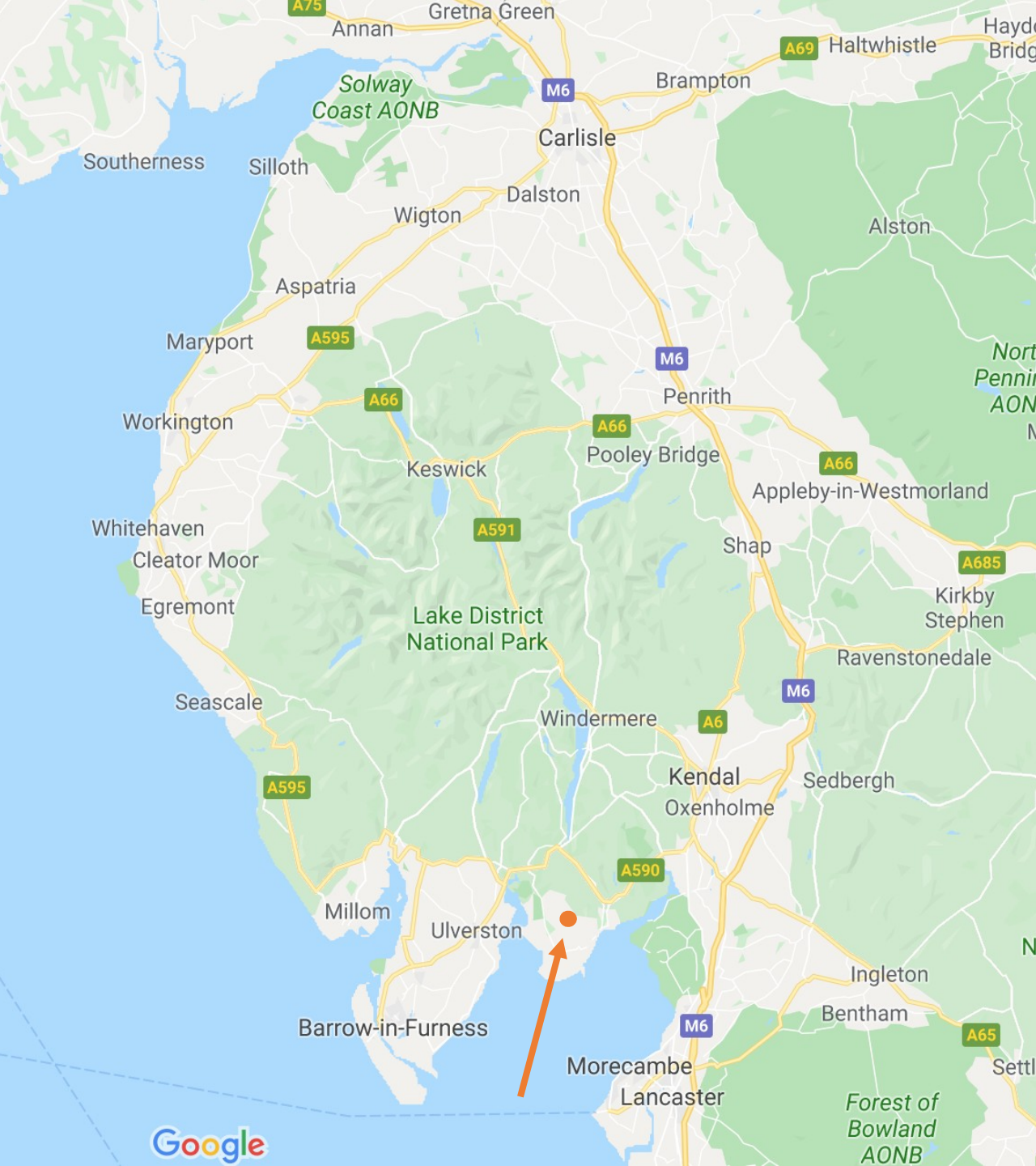


“physically detached from the rest of Britain – divided from Lancashire and the Midlands by Morecambe Bay, from Yorkshire and the North-east by the Pennines, and from Scotland by the Solway [...] the Norsemen emphasised it [Lakeland’s isolation] still more by giving to the area what amounted to its own language.”

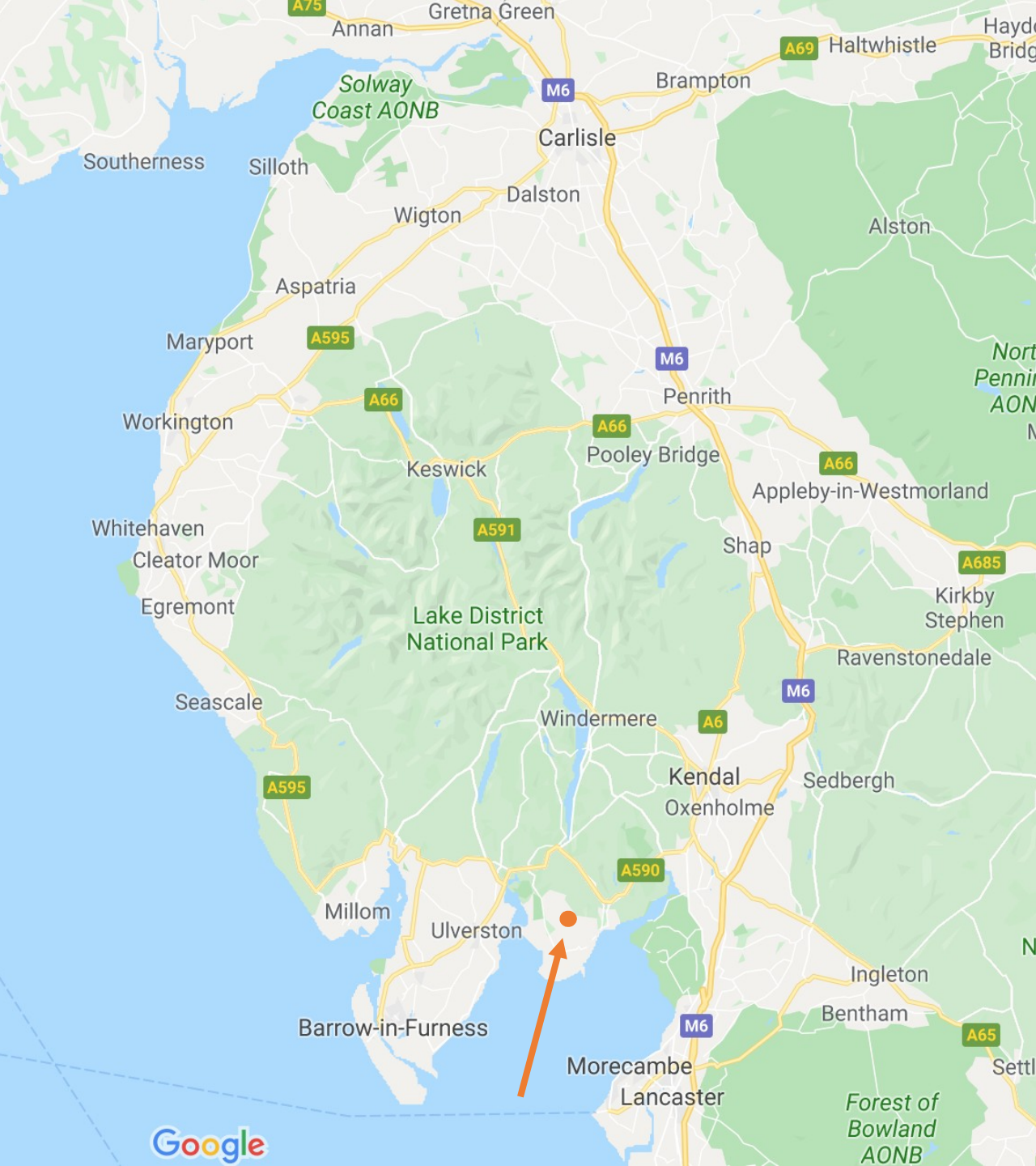
“whatever the BBC and ‘Secondary Education for All’ may do to our accents, most of those of us who live in Greater Lakeland cannot help using our old Norse tongue every time we give our name and address.”



“the limestone valley in which it lies still rings with the Scandinavian vocabulary that the invading Vikings brought to the North-west [*sic*] over a thousand years ago. Fell, dale, beck, tarn are words familiar enough to any Englishman, yet they are not mere synonyms for hill, valley, brook and small lake.



They have an unmistakably northern accent – you cannot think of a tarn in Kent or a beck in Tooting Bec. The Scandinavian trade-mark is printed the whole length of Greater Lakeland, from top to bottom. In the north, the Solway is entirely Norse, a wath, or ford, and a sul, or pillar; while, in the south, the Morecambe bay valleys bristle with scales, slacks, becks and thorpes.”



Fell = Old Norse *fjall* or *fell* - mountain

Dale = Old Norse *dalur* - valley

beck = Old Norse *bekkur* - stream

tarn = Old Norse *tjörn* - a small mountain lake

scale = Old Norse *skáli* - hut or shieling

slack = Old Norse *slakki* - small shallow valley



Cornthwaite, 'the clearing of the corn',
My mother's maiden name – whose umpteenth great-
grandfather,
Off-come from a northern voe, hacked thorn,
Oak-scrub and birch from rake and beck-bank
To sow his peck of oats, not much of a crop.
Lish as a wind-racked larch, he took his trod
Through landscape nameless still to him, until,
Remembering his own grandfather's talk
Of *tveit* and *dal* and *fiell*,
He scratched those words on the rocks,
Naming the Cymric cwms in a Norse tongue.
The land then named him back.

And here, a millennium later, my baptismal card
Clacks echoes of a clearing beneath cracked
Granite and black pines, where the migrant fieldfare
breeds
And the ungregarious, one-flowered cloudberry
Is commoner than crowding bramble. Now,
In my own day's dale, under the slant
Scree of unstable time, I lop,
chop and bill-hook at thickets and rankness of speech,
Straining to let light in, make space for a word,
To hack out once again my inherited Thwaite
And sow my peck of poems, not much of a crop.

Cornthwaite, 'the clearing of the corn',
My mother's maiden name – whose umpteenth great-
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“The naming and identification of particular topographical features, such as sand dunes, bays and inlets, mountain peaks, etc., settlements and sites is crucial for the establishment and maintenance of their identity. Through an act of naming [...] such places become invested with meaning and significance. [...] Without a name culturally significant sites would not exist, but only as a raw void, a natural environment. In a fundamental way names create landscapes.” (Tilley 1994, 18-19)

Cornthwaite, 'the clearing of the corn',
My mother's maiden name – whose umpteenth great-grandfather,
Off-come from a northern **voe**, hacked thorn,
Oak-scrub and birch from **rake** and **beck**-bank
To sow his peck of oats, not much of a crop.

Rake = narrow path
or fissure in rock. Cf.
Old Norse *reik*, *rák*.

Voe = bay or
inlet, Old Norse
vágr

“The present is not marked off from a past that it has replaced or a future that will, in turn, replace it; it rather gathers the past and future into itself, like refractions in a crystal ball.” -- Tim Ingold

Dal* and *fjell* vs **voe and beck*

Lish as a wind-racked larch, **he took his trod**
Through landscape nameless still to him, until,
Remembering his own grandfather's talk
Of *tveit* and *dal* and *fiell*,
He scratched those words on the rocks,

Dialect words ensure a determinedly regional linguistic
atmosphere and drum home the Norse imprint in land and
language.

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“My grandfather, Richard Nicholson, and my great-grandfather, a farmer of Hard Crag, Cartmel, came from the men of Viking stock who, for centuries, spoke a dialect so packed with Norse words that it sounded like a foreign language to an Englishman of the south. As for my other grandfather, *his* name was Cornthwaite; and thwaite, or clearing, is the commonest of all the Scandinavian elements in our place-names.”

“Scarf Gap, Buttermere”

“screes of the slithering moment”

“[the fells] seem now / More lasting memorial than the rubble of cities”

“Themselves the wrack and backwash / Of the geological tides”

“memory [...] / Could find the name scratched on the same stone”.

Scarf Gap \sqsubseteq Scarth Gap Pass = Scarð + gap + pass

Skarð \sqsubseteq Old Norse for notch, chink and mountain pass

Gap \sqsubseteq Norse-derived middle or modern English word

Pass \sqsubseteq French-derived modern English

“The race which made the Norse crosses [...] has left its names hacked on the fellsides and scotched along the walls of the dales. It has left its language still alive in the dialect. It has left a dale way of life which remained unchanged for centuries.”

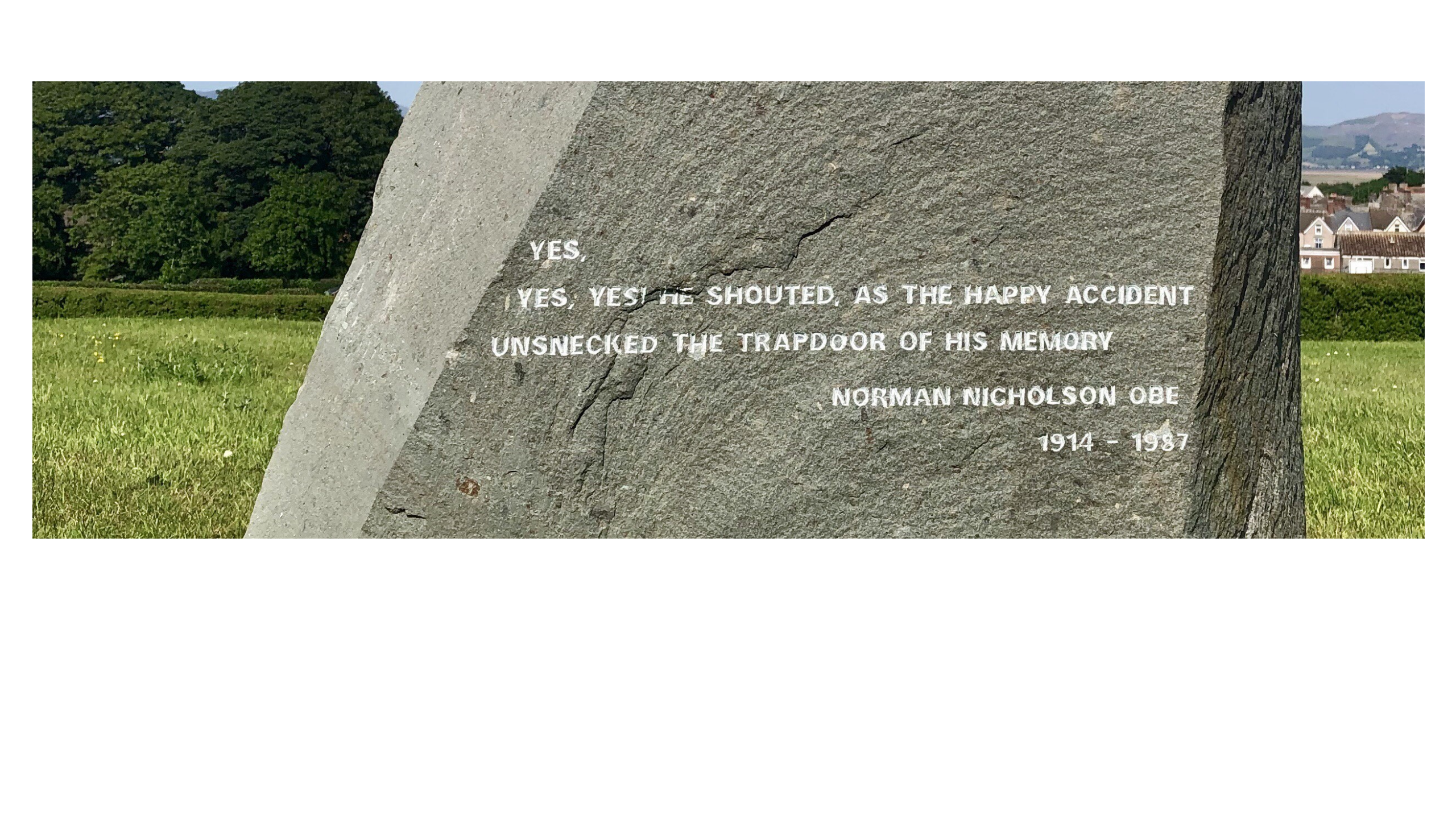


St Mary's
Hospice

30 YEARS OF CARE
1989 - 2019

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UNSNAPPED THE TRAPDOOR OF HIS MEMORY
NORMAN NICHOLSON OBE
1914 - 1987

MILNING



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UNSNECKED THE TRAPDOOR OF HIS MEMORY

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