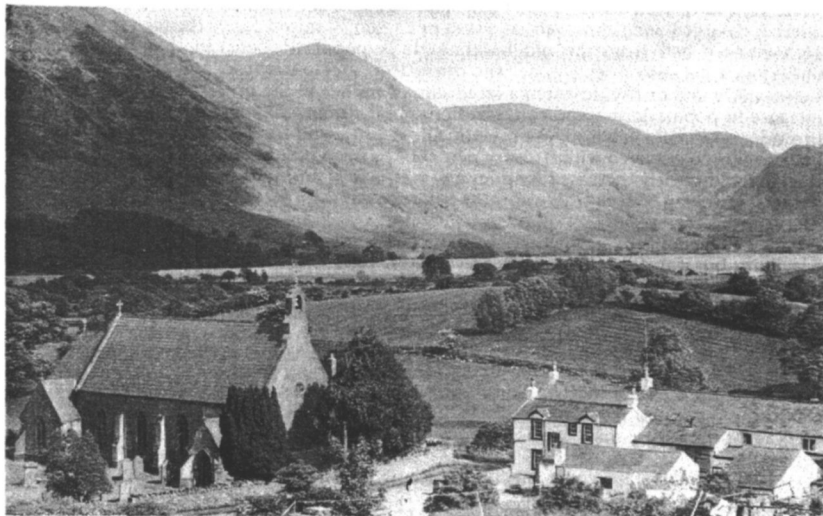


The Parish Church of St. Bartholomew, Loweswater



A Short History

by

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A short history of St. Bartholomew's Church, Loweswater

The church in which we stand today dates almost entirely from the year 1884 when what must have been a small plain 'Lakeland Chapel', consecrated in 1829, was extensively altered, enlarged and 'improved' at a cost of £1,200 — raised partly through the sale of the 14th century bell from the old building. It is popularly believed that this work was undertaken because a lead mine was opened up at Godferhead and the inhabitants of Loweswater and district invested a large sum of money in the project in the hope of a vast increase in population — and congregations. In the event the mining venture failed to live up to its optimistic promise, the investment was lost and the population remained static, but the church survived with its lofty new roof, a new chancel, vestry and organ chamber, flooring and greatly-increased seating, and north-west entrance porch (the old entrance in the west wall may be seen where now the bell rope hangs).

It is not known exactly where the first church was situated in Loweswater nor when it was built, but it must surely have been very near the site of the present building, on higher ground between the lakes and adjacent to the main tracks, with its uplifting view up the valley over the fells. There is no more magnificent site in Cumbria.

The first mention of a place of worship at Loweswater occurs in 1125 in the records of St. Bees Priory where it is stated that Randulphus de Lindsey gave the chapel and two bovates of land to our mother church. Monks from the priory would come and take the services and popular local tradition tells of bodies for burial being taken all the way to St. Bees along the corpse road through Holme Wood.

Two further references in medieval documents tell of Bishops with licence to dedicate chapels at Loweswater, and the 14th century bell survives eloquently from this period. Another treasure (now in a bank vault) is a silver chalice and paten cover dating from 1571, and after a visitation in that same year it was stated of Loweswater that "they have no service but as they provide themselves." The years after the Reformation must have been very unsettling, with the monks and priests gone and Queen Elizabeth I's struggle to establish a National Church, especially in these remote corners of the land.

That church life settled down again in the following centuries is clear from the appearance of resident curates, and some stories of these men will be found in a later paragraph. In spite of their devotion and hard work the 18th century was generally a period of spiritual decline — so it is not surprising to find a new church built in Loweswater after the Wesleyan revival and the Evangelical movement had stirred the country.

The next reference to the church in Loweswater confirms that this new building was erected between 1827 and 1829 and consecrated on 24th August 1829 in honour of St. Bartholomew. Bishop J. B. Sumner came all the way from Chester to perform the ceremony, as West Cumberland was then still part of the Chester Diocese. He was a man of considerable attainment as he later became Archbishop of Canterbury, and his wife too had her claim to fame as the founder of the Mother's Union.

The new building, as can be seen from the illustrations, was much simpler than that in which we now worship, and it had several features which would have been treasured today, including a 'three-decker' pulpit, box pews and a gallery for the choir (there would be no organ, the clerk giving a note on the pitch-pipe). These all disappeared in the alterations of 1884, the only survival being the board on which the Ten Commandments, Creed and Lord's Prayer are painted, which may still be seen on the east wall of the organ chamber. Originally, as is clear from the illustration, this board occupied the east end of the 1829 church behind the altar. Another possible reminder of the earlier church may be the nave windows — Nikolaus Pevsner writes in the 'Buildings of England (Cumberland and Westmorland)' that "All one sees now appears to be of 1884, except perhaps the nave lancets with Y-tracery".

This brief story of the life of our church could never be complete without some details of some of the 33 men known to have ministered to the religious needs of the parish. It appears that 'Westray' was the first permanent resident curate, but the dates of his tenure of office are lost to history although John Borranskail who succeeded him came to Loweswater in about 1600. In the centenary booklet of 1929, after recording that Borranskail served here for 73 years, dying in 1674 at the age it must be assumed of 96 years, the Rev. John Rowland wrote — "it is therefore not surprising that he was unable during his later years to keep the registers entered up, and also that the old register was lost". From 1674 the registers are intact, and are deposited in the County Archives in Carlisle, although photo-copies are kept in the church safe.

Borranskail was followed by Patricius Curwen, a member of the ancient Curwen family of Workington, who was ordained Deacon to the Curacy of Loweswater in March 1673 by Bishop Rainbow of Carlisle acting for the Bishop of Chester. After 13 years he obtained a faculty to teach boys at Loweswater, presumably in the church, and lived at Gillerthwaite for 28 years until he left for Lorton, where he died.

Another long-serving incumbent was Henry Forrest, ordained Deacon in 1708 although his Priesthood was delayed until 1730, so one wonders how the good people of Loweswater managed for Holy Communion? He served here until 1742, showing talent as a parochial historian with a leaning towards philosophical poetry as the following lines (left in the registers) illustrate:-

"Honour the Idoll which I most adore
Receives no homage from my knee,
Content in privacy I value more,
Than all uneasie dignity".

The Rev. Thomas Cowper, son of John Cowper of High Snab, Newlands came in 1744 and his energetic incumbency lasted for 51 years during which time he chronicled many events in the County and Parish — the seige of Carlisle by the Young Pretender in 1745, the removal of the nave roof and its replacement with Ewe Cragg slates in 1751, and a new chancel roof and plastering in 1753. He also recorded some fearsome natural disasters, such as "the greatest storm of wind known to any man living" in 1756, floods in 1760, and in January 1757 "one of the thickest snows that ever was seen by any person then living", so much so that on 11th January "no service was done in any churches in Cumberland". He, too, had a bent for doggerel verse; his lines in memory of Anne Banks of Low Park who died in 1757 aged 33, "a charming singer of Psalms", are recorded in the registers. Another example of his care for the church was the statement that "in 1778 the Church was ceiled, flagged and pewed and the new pulpit and reading desk were made in it". During Cowper's incumbency the School House was built in 1780 (now Rose Cottage) and the Mockerkin Schoolroom followed in 1781. Such energy belies the general apathy attributed to the 18th century.

The next two incumbents were often absent from the parish, and had Assistant Curates to perform their duties, but it was towards the end of the life of the Rev. Lancaster Dodgson (who died in 1828) that the old church was taken down. Jeremiah Atkinson had become Curate when the new church was consecrated in 1829, and he presided over further building. He lived for part of his first 4 years at Low House, Brackenthwaite, as there was still no official residence for the incumbent, but in 1832 he went to live in the newly-built Parsonage which still stands as the present Vicarage and has his name over the front door. Mr. Atkinson was also the last priest/schoolmaster at the little school, which at one time numbered 72 children, for in 1839 the new larger School was built, continuing in existence until 1952 when it was closed and turned in to the present Village Hall.

In 1856 Loweswater became part of the Diocese of Carlisle, and a local farmer commented of the first Bishop who came for a Confirmation, "he would ha' made a gran' farmer!" In 1895 we became a separate Parish and the incumbents were styled Vicars.

Among some interesting Victorian incumbents were G. M. Tandy who dabbled in spiritualism and was something of a poet, William Thwaites who was only here for 4 years but who organised the building of the present church and arranged climbing parties, and John Gamble who installed the first hot-water heating system.

The number of faithful clergy continues into the 20th century. John Rowland celebrated the centenary of the 1829 church with a red carpet in the chancel and later an extension of the churchyard; Herbert Prince in 1933 was a member of a much-respected local family, some of whom are buried in the old churchyard; Murray Hodges was here in the difficult war years; Geoffrey White saw to the installation of electric lighting and heating when electricity came to the valley in 1962 and the triumphant return of the old bell ten years later to call us to prayer from its rightful place in the bell-cote; and Robert Lindsay was an Hon. Canon of Carlisle and Rural Dean of Derwent.

Much more could be written of the history of St. Bartholomew's church, and of those clergy and laity who lived in the parish but the facts outlined above illustrate how, like most churches in our country, Loweswater's Church has altered in shape, size and character over the centuries. It will continue to change as all churches should, evolving in tune with, following, keeping pace with and sometimes even leading in the development of life in the community in which the House of God plays such an important part.

Our Appeal for funds for necessary repairs, contained in a separate brochure, is made in the hope that there will be a church in Loweswater for many more years and your generous response to this request for help is earnestly requested.



Exterior 1829



Interior before 1884