

Welcome to the CCHT e-newsletter. Keeping you up-to-date with the VCH Cumbria project.

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CUMBERLAND AND WESTMORLAND  
ANTIQUARIAN AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY



## Lonsdale Ward Launch

Supporters of CCHT gathered in Kirkby Lonsdale on the evening of 23rd September to celebrate our long-awaited first Red Book volume, [\*A History of the County of Westmorland Vol. I, Lonsdale Ward\*](#), which was published on 8th August. Copies are still available to buy!



*Photo courtesy of Dr Geoff Jolliffe*

The launch event was chaired by Lord Inglewood, Vice Lord-Lieutenant and patron of CCHT. Others present included the High Sheriff, Dr Geoff Jolliffe, Lizzi Collinge MP, Paul Cassell, chairman of Kirkby Lonsdale Town Council, and Warren Allison, Treasurer of CWAAS, as well as VCH volunteers and many local people who had assisted with research for the book. One of the most important guests was Sarah Gillibrand, niece of the late Emmeline Garnett, one of the main authors of the book. We were able to present Emmeline's copy to Sarah, who accepted it on behalf of the Garnett family. We hope Emmeline would have been as proud of this volume as we all are. The event also allowed us to launch the excellent School Resource pack that our MA intern Becky Brown created in collaboration with St Mary's Primary School.

The success of the launch event owes much to the efforts of Lorna Mullett and Steph Carter, so a huge thank you to them for arranging it all. It was also wonderful to see several of the county newspapers reporting on the book's publication, alongside BBC Radio Cumbria. As this was the 250th Big Red Book for England, VCH Central Office hosted an online launch event on 24th September. This was recorded and can be accessed [here](#). There is also a blog post about the book and the project on the [BALH website](#).

## Project Directorship

We are sorry to report that Chris Donaldson has stepped down as the Director of VCH Cumbria and the Regional Heritage Centre. Chris brought a great deal of enthusiasm and regional knowledge to the role, which particularly benefitted volunteer activities. He was also a contributing author on *Westmorland I*, which benefitted from his expertise on Lakeland travel. We wish Chris all the best for the future. Lancaster University is currently seeking a new Director. We will keep you updated on any developments.

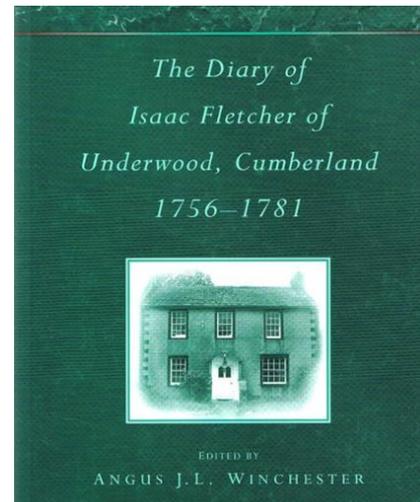
## The Farming Year

From January 2026, the CCHT website will be hosting extracts from the *Diary of Isaac Fletcher* (1714-1781). Fletcher was a Quaker yeoman farmer and lawyer who lived at Underwood, in Mosser township, on the north-west edge of the Lake District, four miles south of Cockermouth. For a quarter of a century from 1756, he kept a daily diary, which provides a rare glimpse into everyday life in West Cumberland in the 18th century. Each month, Angus Winchester will select some of Fletcher's diary entries to illustrate aspects of the annual round, the weather and the farming calendar in Georgian Cumbria.



View towards St Michael's Church, Mosser  
([geograph.org.uk](http://geograph.org.uk))

The diary extracts will also feature in BBC Radio 4's 'Farming Today' programme, which will interview a modern farmer in the Mosser area to look at how farming has changed over 250 years. This is scheduled for broadcast on Tuesday 30th December. As 'Farming Today' goes out at 5.45 a.m., you may wish to catch up on BBC Sounds!



The diary was published in 1994  
by CWAAS

## Kendal Local Heritage Partnership

With local heritage services under threat, the Kendal Local Heritage Partnership was recently formed to promote cooperation and collaboration between heritage organisations in the town. With CCHT Trustee Rob David acting as Vice Chair, the inaugural meeting of the Partnership was held on 4th September.

The future of the Kendal Town Museum collection and Kendal Archives are key areas of interest. There are a number of current funding bids designed to unlock the collection in the Lakeland Museum in Kendal and secure a foundation for the [future development and re-opening of the Museum](#). The first stage of National Lottery Heritage funding has also been secured for addressing maintenance issues and reconfiguring internal space for exhibition and performance at Kendal Parish Church.

The next meeting of the Partnership will be held on 26th January 2026.

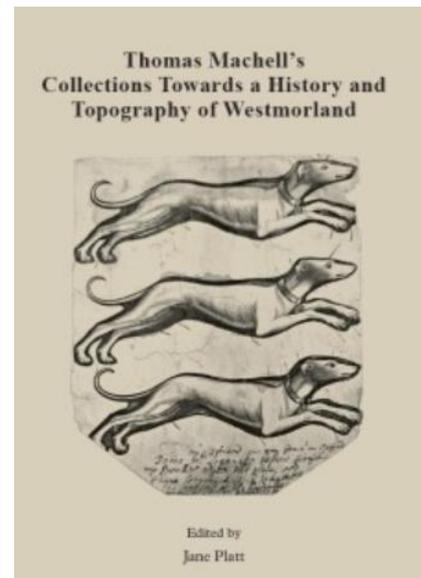
## Neurodivergency and the VCH

Dr Christopher Tinmouth, who worked with VCH Cumbria over the past Spring and Summer, has written a blog for the VCH national webpages which discusses how neurodivergent participation might be encouraged within community research initiatives and the value of this.

Christopher explores how the talents of autistic people can be made best use of in the humanities and reflects on his own experience, including his work for the VCH. You can read the blog article [here](#).

## A Labour of Love: Thomas Machell's *History and Topography of Westmorland*

Thanks to the herculean efforts of Dr Jane Platt FRHistS, a key source for Cumbrian history was published earlier this year by CWAAS. Thomas Machell's *Collections Towards a History and Topography of Westmorland* is now available to download in electronic format, free of charge, from the [CWAAS website](#). We caught up with Jane to find out more about the book and the decade-long project that has brought Machell's manuscript to publication.



*Q. Can you tell us a little bit about Thomas Machell and what he wrote about?*

Thomas Machell (baptised 1647–died 1698) was a younger son of the Machell family of Crackenthorpe Hall. After school (probably at Appleby) he entered the Queen's College, Oxford, later becoming a fellow. In the late 1670s he married and was ordained, returning home to be rector of Kirkby Thore. While at Oxford, Machell was one of a group following in the footsteps of William Camden and William Dugdale by exploring regional history and topography. This research was underpinned by an evolving method of scientific enquiry at Oxford, exemplified in the work of Machell's friend, Robert Plot, Oxford professor of chemistry, curator of the Ashmolean Museum and author of the *Natural History of Oxfordshire*. Influenced by such figures, Machell's objective was to reveal the history, topography and natural history of Cumberland and Westmorland, their parishes and towns. Before his death he had amassed a huge number of notes and draft narratives, plus a collection of revealing correspondence. All of this was later placed in six volumes by Bishop William Nicolson. While the notes cover aspects of both counties, Machell's deep affection for his own locality guaranteed that the greater proportion of his research would be devoted to the county of Westmorland, particularly the Appleby area of his birth. Machell's material on Cumberland (mainly confined to Volume VI) forms a minor part of the whole, most of it consisting of volumes written by others.

Today's historians know of Machell's research mainly through the publication of various articles in CWAAS *Transactions* and Jane Ewbank's transcription of Machell's journey through the Barony of Kendal (*Antiquary on Horseback. The First Publication of The Collections of the Rev. Thos. Machell Chaplain to King Charles II Towards a History of the Barony of Kendal*, CWAAS Extra Series 19, Kendal, 1963). This body of evidence, large as it is, comprises only a small part of Machell's work; the state in which he left his papers and his frequently indecipherable handwriting have militated against deeper study.

*Q. How did Machell gather all this information?*

At Oxford, Machell played a decisive part in the planning and distribution of the first antiquarian questionnaires. When writing their county histories, antiquaries made greater

discoveries when they began to send out printed questionnaires containing numbered 'heads' or 'articles of enquiry' to would-be assistants in every corner of their chosen county. The practice came into being through Francis Bacon (1561-1626), whose empirical approach to scientific enquiry by means of observation and induction was developed by later Oxford scholars. Their research into 'natural knowledge' deliberately mixed antiquities and natural history while also encouraging collaborative methods. In 1673 the scientist Robert Hooke, the publisher and cartographer John Ogilby, the surveyor Gregory King, the lawyer John Hoskins, the architect Christopher Wren, and the antiquary John Aubrey, joined together to create some 'Queries in order to the description of Britannia'. The first fact-finding documents to be directed at individuals in the British regions, these queries were used by John Aubrey in his survey of Surrey. Machell's own questionnaires were more elaborate, being the first to specify the study of antiquities, history and geography at the parish level. Robert Plot encouraged the inclusion of questions on natural history.

Machell felt let down by the large number of Westmerian landowners who refused to complete his (very long) questionnaire, so he turned to local people to answer his queries, including his own family, village schoolmasters, clergymen and yeomen. His personal research involved spending long hours on horseback, visiting towns, villages, country estates, ancient sites and churches, where he scribbled rough notes and made sketches. Crucially, he also conversed with 'the vulgar (possibly of slow apprehensions) who must be consulted in this undertaking'. Machell dubbed them his 'informants'. Such conversations encouraged Machell's interests in mechanics, horticulture, forestry, land boundaries and the weather, but also gave rise to a fascination in the use of local dialect, stories of strange happenings, accidents, ghosts and other manifestations of the occult.

*Q. This was a huge project. Why did you want to transcribe his work?*

George Mallory was once asked why he was so determined to climb Mount Everest. His simple reply was, 'Because it's there'. This sums up my attitude when I began the task ten years ago. At that time it seemed odd to me that no one had ever published a complete edition of such significant notes when many local historians had celebrated their importance. But ignorance is bliss; week three of the project found me sitting in the county archives in tears while peering at a passage on Appleby which I could not even read, let alone transcribe: I had underestimated the huge difficulties that Machell's handwriting would present. Luckily, I was dogged, and, more importantly, I had access to the professional expertise of a wonderful group of friends and acquaintances who supported me in ways large and small, all the way through. They are gratefully acknowledged in the published edition.

*Q. What was the most challenging part of working with Machell's manuscript?*

Obviously, the handwriting, in all its different manifestations, was hugely challenging, particularly when the text had been overwritten, crossed through or interlineated. The Latin and Greek passages would have caused me endless grief had it not been for the late Dr Jane Penman, who was able to complete that aspect of the transcription before her untimely death. Perhaps the hardest task, though, was the ordering of the collection as Machell had intended. It had been 'thrown together' after his death, with many notes and drafts on similar

places and themes scattered throughout the six volumes of manuscript. It was nerve-wracking to splice separate passages together and even more so to decide which of Machell's frequent repetitions should be excised from the completed edition.

*Q. Do you have any favourite aspects?*

Before I began the project, Professor Angus Winchester introduced me to Professor Adam Fox, whose journal articles have illuminated a previously discounted part of Machell's work. Adam Fox's research has used evidence from Machell's manuscripts to accentuate the importance of vernacular culture in British history, applauding Machell as 'an original and sympathetic recorder of the beliefs and prejudices, customs and practices of his neighbours'. Passages describing vernacular culture have become my favourites. Fox believes Machell to be an antiquary who shared a common interest with John Aubrey 'as an important, and sometimes unique, commentator on vernacular traditions, children's games and calendar rituals'. Using his cherished county of Westmorland as a source, Machell was able to draw on what he judged to be its people's distinctive character. To quote Fox once more, 'He was the painstaking and sympathetic observer of a culture with which he was intimately familiar'. Machell was also a great teller of stories. The combination of his informants' wit and Machell's ability to translate their oral histories into captivating text has become, for me, the most enjoyable feature of the edition.

## Supporting CCHT

Your support of CCHT is greatly appreciated. If you know anyone who you think might be interested in helping our work, please ask them to consider becoming a supporter. There are several ways they can help:

- Keep in touch with us: sign up to receive our newsletter and keep up to date with the project. You can also follow us on X: [@VCH\\_Cumbria](#)
- Come and support us: you can give any monthly or annual donation through our website [www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk](http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk)
- Come and join us: membership is open to any interested individual, society, or organisation for an annual subscription of at least £25; life membership is a one-off contribution of £1,000.
- Come and work with us: anyone interested in researching local, regional or family history can contribute to the VCH Cumbria project. Training and guidance will be provided by the project team at Lancaster University. To find out more, please email [cchistorytrust@gmail.com](mailto:cchistorytrust@gmail.com) or visit our website [www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk](http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk)

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