

Christopher Donaldson, Joanna E. Taylor, Ian N. Gregory: The Lake District as a Cultural Landscape¹

This short paper reports on research undertaken by the Geospatial Innovation in the Digital Humanities project at Lancaster University. The case study discussed pertains to the National Trust's conservation strategies at one of its key properties in the Lake District National Park: Tarn Hows (OS Grid Ref: SD 33068 99977). In addition to explaining the methods and findings of this research, our report considers the relation of the National Trust's management practices at these properties to historical and contemporary perceptions of the role of human industry and agency in shaping the Lake District.

Since the 1980s representatives for the Lake District National Park have submitted three applications to secure UNESCO World Heritage Site status. The most recent bid, which was approved earlier this summer, was submitted to achieve recognition for the region as a cultural landscape. UNESCO introduced its cultural landscape designation in the early 1990s to establish guidelines for acknowledging environments whose heritage value has been co-produced by 'nature and humankind'.² This designation was created in response to the Lake District's first bid for World Heritage Site status in 1986. It was established in order to afford managed landscapes like the Lake District the opportunity to achieve recognition as a part of the 'legacy from the past' that UNESCO seeks to preserve.³

The efforts to secure World Heritage Site status for the Lake District as a cultural landscape have focussed attention on the human influences and historical processes that have shaped the area within and surrounding the National Park. These efforts have, consequently, helped to deepen our appreciation of the fact that the Lake District is a region that has been

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² P. J. Fowler, 'World Heritage Cultural Landscapes, 1992–2002', *UNESCO World Heritage Centre* (2013), 18, accessed August 6, 2017, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001331/133121e.pdf>.

³ UNESCO, 'World Heritage', *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, 2017, accessed August 6, 2017, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/about/>.

affected by a variety of human interventions, ranging from agro-pastoralism to picturesque improvement and from commercial exploitation to environmental conservation.

Our research, which has emerged in this context, explores how human perceptions, experiences, and understandings of the Lake District have evolved over the past 300 years. We are particularly interested in investigating the relation of historical ideas about the Lake District to attitudes towards the management of the region in the present day. In undertaking this investigation, our research combines a mixed methods approach that uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS), as well as other geo-spatial technologies, to analyse historical textual, pictorial, and cartographic representations of the region. In our more recent work (on which we shall touch at the conclusion of this report), we have also begun to draw on other materials, including photographs sourced from social media.

One of the core resources for our research is the Corpus of Lake District Writing.⁴ This corpus is a digitised collection of historic writing about the Lake District. Presently, this corpus comprises 80 works, which were identified using Peter Bicknell's bibliography *The Picturesque Scenery of the Lake District* and Martin and Jean Norgate's *Guides to the Lakes* website.⁵ The corpus contains a heterogeneous selection of works, including both topographical prose and verse, as well as novels, travelogues, and guidebooks. Collectively, these works constitute a representative sample of writing about the region from the beginning of the seventeenth century through to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Our engagement with this corpus has chiefly focussed on evaluating the different portions of the Lake District to which tourists have been historically attracted. We are specifically interested in determining how the tourist experience of the region has evolved in

⁴ 'Corpus of Lake District Writing, 1622-1900', UCREL, Lancaster University, *GitHub*, 2016, accessed August 6, 2017, <https://github.com/UCREL/LakeDistrictCorpus>.

⁵ Peter Bicknell, *The Picturesque Scenery of the Lake District, 1752–1855: A Bibliography* (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1990); M. Norgate and J. Norgate, *Guides to the Lakes*, 2016, accessed August 6, 2017, <http://www.lakesguides.co.uk/>.

relation to cultural, societal, and infrastructural developments.⁶ Integrating methodologies from corpus linguistics and historical onomastics, we have also undertaken examinations of the different attributes assigned to and associated with places in the Lake District in order to determine how perceptions of the region have changed and to explore the reasons for these changes.⁷

Such findings are, of course, most immediately relevant to scholarship in the historical and cultural humanities. Importantly, though, the methodologies developed through our research can have practical implications for organisations beyond the academy as well. Recently, for example, we have been pursuing research into one of the National Trust's most iconic Lake District properties: Tarn Hows, a nineteenth-century designed landscape near Coniston. The National Trust's planning at the Tarn Hows site corresponds to conservation strategies that are evolving in relation to several of the organisation's Lake District properties. Broadly, these strategies aim to respond to the need to evaluate planned changes in relation not only to the heritage of the Lakeland landscape, but also to its perceived harmony and visual integrity.

Tarn Hows is an ideal focus for considering the Lake District's status as a cultural landscape. The history of the site affirms the continuing relevance of historical ways of looking at and appreciating the region in the present day. The site, moreover, reminds us that many of the Lake District's most iconic locations are the product of specific aesthetic and functional interventions that have taken place within the last 150 years. The way these sites have been viewed and understood has often changed substantially.

The name Tarn Hows is telling in just this regard. Tarn Hows is a combination of two toponyms commonly found in Cumbria and the North West: *tarn* (from the Old Norse *tjörn*,

⁶ See Christopher Donaldson, Ian N. Gregory, and Patricia Murrieta-Flores, 'Mapping "Wordsworthshire": A GIS Study of Victorian Lake District Tourism', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20, no. 3 (2015): 287–307.

⁷ See Christopher Donaldson, Ian N. Gregory, and Joanna E. Taylor, 'Locating the Beautiful, Picturesque, Sublime and Majestic: Spatially Analysing the Application of Aesthetic Terminology in Descriptions of the English Lake District', *Journal of Historical Geography* 56 (2017): 43–60.

or ‘pool’) and *hows* (from the Old Norse *haugr*, or ‘steep, free-standing hill’). Literally, then, the name Tarn Hows means ‘the hill [*hows*] by the pool [*tarn*]’.⁸ This is significant because it clues us into the fact that the name Tarn Hows initially referred not to the body of water that forms the visual centrepiece of the property today, but rather to a nearby hill. More specifically, it referred to a farm situated on that hill, which overlooked the vale and lake of Coniston below. This is a designation that appears in local parish records from the early sixteenth century, and it is as a reference to a farm that the name Tarn Hows first appears in our corpus.

Consider for example the following extract from William Wordsworth’s *Guide Through the District of the Lakes* (1835): ‘From the Inn at the head of Coniston Lake, a leisurely Traveller might have much pleasure in looking into Yewdale and Tilberthwaite, returning to his Inn from the head of Yewdale by a mountain track which has *the farm of Tarn Hows* a little on the right: by this road is seen much the best view of Coniston Lake from the south’.⁹ Similar statements appear in the Lakeland writings of other influential authors, including Thomas de Quincey, as well as in the works of a few lesser-known figures like Jonathan Otley, Alexander Craig Gibson, and Herman Prior. Collectively, these accounts of Tarn Hows indicate two important facts. In the first place, they clarify that our understanding of where Tarn Hows actually *is* has changed with the passage of time. In the second place, they affirm that – these changes notwithstanding – the location designated as Tarn Hows has long been valued in relation to its viewshed. Certainly, when the place is mentioned in our corpus it is named for the sake of the scenic view of the surrounding countryside it affords.

This way of thinking about Tarn Hows – that is, as a beauty spot – underwent an

⁸ Diana Whaley, *A Dictionary of Lake District Place-Names* (Nottingham: English Place-Name Society, 2006), 336.

⁹ William Wordsworth, *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes*, 5th ed. (London: Longman & Co., 1835), ix–x; emphasis added.

intensification during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This was principally a result of the programme of improvements that James Garth Marshall (1802–1873), owner of the Monk Coniston estate, began during the 1850s. These improvements included the damming of the three separate pools that once dotted the small vale to form a single, larger tarn. Marshall also oversaw the ornamental planting of different species of fir trees (including spruces, larches, and pines) to create a series of sightlines onto both the tarn’s promontories and bays and the Lakeland fells rising in the distance.

The results of these initiatives was a designed landscape well suited to fulfil the needs of later nineteenth-century visitors in search of, what John K. Walton and Paul R. McGloin have called, ‘the intellectual, moral, and spiritual benefits [...] derived from the contemplation of Nature’.¹⁰ Later Victorian guidebooks, such as M. J. B. Baddeley’s highly influential *Thorough Guide to the English Lakes* (1880), make it clear that the fruits of Marshall’s landscaping proved popular with contemporary Lakeland tourists. Certainly, by the end of the nineteenth century one finds local worthies such as Henry Swainson Cowper affirming that Tarn Hows was ‘perhaps the most visited corner in all [the locality], if we except a point or two on Windermere’.¹¹

One of the more remarkable features of these later accounts of Tarn Hows is the way they describe the effect of the fir trees Marshall had planted around the property. For writers, such as Cowper, these ‘dark plantations of spruce and larch’ added to the varied atmosphere of the property.¹² For commentators such as Baddeley and his contemporary, George Abraham, these ‘dark plantations’ offset by the austere ‘*cordon* of distant mountains’ gave

¹⁰ J. K. Walton and P. R. McGloin, ‘Tourist Trade in Victorian Lakeland’, *Northern History* 17, no.1 (1981), 154.

¹¹ Henry Swainson Cowper, *Hawkshead: (The Northernmost Parish of Lancashire) Its History, Archaeology, Industries, Folklore, Dialect, Etc. Etc.* (London: Bemrose & Sons, Ltd., 1899), 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

Tarn Hows a visual profile more ‘suggestive [...] of a Scotch loch than an English mere’.¹³

What is surprising about such descriptions is how incongruous they seem with the appearance of Tarn Hows today. Since the early twentieth century, the tree growth at Tarn Hows has gone unchecked, and this has changed not only the visual aspect of the property, but also the sightlines that formed a part of Marshall’s design. Today, however, the Trust have begun a programme of clearing and thinning to restore several of these sight lines. To help the Trust assess how visitors interact with Tarn Hows and the potential impact of the tree-thinning programme on visitors’ experiences we have undertaken an experimental survey of the visual records created by visitors using the photo-sharing web resource, Flickr. We used the Flickr API to create a dataset comprising all photographs with coordinates for the locality of Tarn Hows in their metadata. In total, these photographs amounted to 355 images, which – collectively – give an insight into those parts of Tarn Hows that visitors to the property consider most worthy of documenting photographically.

This research is still in its preliminary phases, and at present it is based on a relatively small dataset. We are hoping to continue this process of extracting image data from Flickr in order to assemble a larger sample on which to conduct analyses. In addition, we are hoping to repeat the exercise once the programme of thinning has started, as doing so may enable us to see if patterns change as a result of the National Trust’s scenic conservation work.

We believe that this sort of research can make a meaningful contribution to ongoing discussions about the value decisions that inform the management of properties such as Tarn Hows. These discussions are important, especially in light of the ~~recent application to achieve~~[recognition of the Lake District as an UNESCO -World Heritage Site](#) ~~status for the Lake District National Park~~. They remind us, to quote the architectural historian Susan Denyer, of the need to recognise how ‘the idea of natural beauty’ is crucially linked with and

¹³ M. J. B. Baddeley, *The Thorough Guide to the English Lakes* (London: Dulau & Co., 1880), 80; see also George D. Abraham, *Motor Ways in the Lake District* (London: Methuen & Co., 1913).

informed by ‘people’s interaction with nature’. They remind us, moreover, of the need to balance ‘planned changes to the landscape’ in relation to their potential ‘impact on its overall beauty, harmony and visual integrity’.¹⁴

¹⁴ Susan Denyer, ‘The Lake District Landscape: Cultural or Natural?’, in *The Making of a Cultural Landscape: The Lake District as Tourist Destination*, ed. John K. Walton and Jason Wood (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 26.