
Article:
Pillatt, T.A., Thorpe, G., Marwood, K. et al. (1 more author) (2019) A break in the clouds: connecting community experiences in Mosser, Cumbria. Journal of Contemporary Archaeology, 5 (2). pp. 117-134. ISSN 2051-3429

https://doi.org/10.1558/jca.34512

A Break in the Clouds: Connecting Community Experiences in Mosser, Cumbria

Abstract

This photo essay accompanies a short film, *A Break in the Clouds*, which explores everyday life in Mosser, a small former township on the north-west edge of the Lake District. Prompted by the historical diaries of two eighteenth-century Quaker farmers from the same area, connections were drawn between the experiences of the current farmers and those in the past. The text discusses those connections, the making of the film, and how our approach was designed to democratise the research process. The images, selected by the photographer, reflect on the key themes or 'spaces' that emerged during the research: home/work, land/family, landscape/weather.

Keywords

heritage, farming, landscape, weather, Lake District, modernity

Introduction

"I've never seen sheep so hungry in all my life!" Alan Clark exclaimed when recounting his story of the winter of 2012/13. In Mosser on the north-west edge of the Lake District, farmers had just experienced one of the worst 18 months of weather in living memory. It was May, but spring had only just arrived: "we would normally look to have a 7 month winter for cattle inside, this year we had a 9 month winter". This came after a cool, wet summer and the ground was sodden even before the long winter began. Such an extended run of bad weather had a severe impact on the fortunes of the upland farmers. In the words of Mark Clark, there was "a bumper effect" as the weather accentuated a raft of pre-existing social and economic difficulties affecting the upland farming community.

"*as others have suffered by ye Sword of Pestilence! It seems our lot to suffer by famine!"* remarked Elihu Robinson in 1800, after a winter in which there were rumours of cattle being fed on "*the muck of others"* or only "*spirit and water"*. As with the farmers in the same area some 200 years later, bad weather was making a difficult situation worse. At the end of the eighteenth century, local farmers had experienced a decade of worsening weather, culminating in the threat of famine in 1800. More than once Robinson reported mobs rioting in response to rising grain prices, and at

Cockermouth market his maid had described scenes in which "*she was soon surrounded by a multitude, agitated by different Passions! Some Swearing some Praying! & perhaps some crying in order to be served"*. The potatoes she had were soon sold, but "*notwithstanding her Care & Vigilance, she supposes several did not pay – However she made One Pound, Five Shillings & Nine pence half penny – I think the most I ever made out of one coup – Deplorable Distress"*.

Deep within the 'odd corner of England', clinging to the edge of the Lake District fells, with views westwards over the sea towards the Isle of Man, and the Scottish hills visible over the Solway Firth to the north, Mosser feels like a place of the margins. And yet the landscape and its history is one of connections. The historical diaries of local farmers Isaac Fletcher (Winchester 1994) and Elihu Robinson present unique, first-hand perspectives on the relationships between farming and weather during the eighteenth century (Pillatt 2012, 2012a, 2016). Their regular discussions of the weather, its impact on their lives, and its integration within their Quaker faith, demonstrate deep physical and philosophical connections with the land and environment at a time when the country was rocked by a series of geopolitical, environmental and economic crises. Viewed this way, weather is at the heart of Mosser's history.

Weather-centred perspectives on human-environment relationships have increasingly become a concern of anthropologists, ethnographers and environmental historians. They have shown how weather is an intrinsic part of human experience, encouraging us to make sense of long term environmental change by examining the everyday tasks of working across the landscape (McIntosh, Tainter, and McIntosh 2000; Ingold and Kurttila 2000; Janković 2000; Strauss and Orlove 2003; Golinski 2007; Ingold 2007; Rantala, Valtonen, and Markuksela 2011; Vannini et al. 2012; Veale, Endfield, and Naylor 2014). An investigation of Mosser can add to these discussions: the historical diaries enable detailed comparisons between past and present. What has changed and what has not? How do Mosser's current inhabitants perceive and make sense of the links between their community, weather and the farmed landscape? This photo essay accompanies a film, *A Break in the Clouds* that emerged from a collaboration between an archaeologist (Pillatt) and filmmaker (Thorpe), and which aimed to explore these questions. With further analysis offered by a landscape archaeologist (Johnston) and art historian (Marwood), we explain our methodology and discuss how the resulting film sheds light on conceptions of rural heritage, relating senses of place and identity

with attitudes to work, the landscape and weather. We also reflect on the potential for future research, spurred on by connections between past and present that far exceeded our expectations.

Filmmaking and Photography

From the start, our methodology was strongly influenced by the AHRC Connected Communities funding programme, which aims to bring together researchers and communities in collaborative projects. By involving the community, we hoped to better engage them with archaeological research and encourage new reflections on contemporary life. Our intention was to use the mediums of film and photography not simply as representations of research, but as active interventions in the research process - a form of practice-as-research (Allegue et al 2009). Rather than use the film to tell a story from our perspective, we wanted the community to work with us to tell their story in their way. With this in mind, we were conscious that digital technology presents the possibility of immediate review by participants, and with it the potential democratisation of the creative process (cf. Bannerman and McLaughlin 2009). In other collaborative documentary films, for example the National Film Board of Canada's *Challenge for Change*, this shared ownership of the editing process "encouraged an unusual spontaneity and self confidence amongst its participants" (Barbash and Taylor 1997: 88). We found in practice, however, participants were content to let us work with the footage before passing judgement. This reluctance to suggest changes probably emerged for several reasons: that they placed in us a large degree of trust, that they did not feel comfortable confronting and overruling a professional filmmaker, and also that they were keen to see how outsiders would create something from their stories, perhaps revealing some as yet unrecognised truth. Nevertheless, our approach was aimed explicitly at increasing participation and breaking down divides between 'experts' and 'non-experts', and this was reflected in both the research design and editorial style. It meant, for example, that we went in with very few preconceptions in terms of what the 'angle' was going to be: the research would 'emerge from the engagement'.

The film itself is comprised of a series of audio excerpts from conversations with all the farmers currently working within Mosser, juxtaposed with video and stills of people working in the fields, treasured (and hated) possessions, buildings, livestock and the wider landscape. We opted not to have a narrator or presenter (either would have exerted too much control over the narratives presented by the community), and we decided not to film the interviews, judging that this would

have made participants self-conscious and less comfortable with the discussion. In keeping with our loose research strategy, the interviews followed only a broad pattern, discussing whatever elements of farming and family life the participants wanted to talk about. One fixed feature of the interviews was a task in which we asked the farmers to read excerpts from the eighteenth-century diaries. At first, they were often quite reticent, but it proved to be an incredibly productive exercise. After reading diary extracts about how the weather played an integral role in eighteenth-century farming life, the farmers were struck by how familiar the descriptions were. This then prompted further discussions about weather, farming and the archaeological research. In short, this quasi-performative element to the interviews helped promote and facilitate discussion through which we gained knowledge of life in Mosser now, and the participants gained knowledge of life in Mosser in the past. Together we became aware of the connections and shared experiences that spanned over two centuries, thereby giving the archaeological research a new relevance for the present-day community.

Connections

The stories that the farmers told emerged within a series of clear themes. Many of these are reflected in other research concerning British rural life (e.g. Clark and Murdoch 1997; Crow 2008; Robertson and Webster 2016). There was, for example, concern about the lack of young people staying in the area and taking up farming. Some spoke about the difficulties of maintaining community life when so many in the area are 'incomers' and when tourism provides a constant flow of unfamiliar faces. On the farms, regulatory and administrative burdens were universally derided, and more than once we were told about various absurdities arising from the numerous grant schemes and restrictions operating at regional, national and European scales. While there are no direct analogues for these issues in the eighteenth century, some themes do resonate: rapid industrialisation, overseas trade, new technology and changing farming practices combined to significantly change rural demographics during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bouch and Jones 1961; Searle 1993; Whyte 2003). There was a flood of people into new urban centres, and farming was re-geared to servicing the demands this placed on food supply. Whereas farmers today worry that the price of food is unrealistically cheap, blockades and bad harvests led to prices soaring out of control at the end of the eighteenth century. Overall, there is a sense, both in the eighteenth century and today, of farmers being subject to geopolitical events well outside their

control, whether that be in Westminster or Brussels, or on the Boston quayside and at the gates of the Bastille. These external influences, through the medium of local markets (every bit as important today as they were 200 years ago), are reflected across the landscape, such as through the enclosure of common lands, intensification and consolidation of farm holdings, and changes in land use.

Whilst there clearly is some semblance between farming life now and in the eighteenth century, the most obvious and striking similarities came with recollections of weather. As the introduction indicates, the run of bad weather at the end of the eighteenth century struck a chord with the farmers. They commented on some of the shared experiences: the lateness of the hawthorn leaves, the lack of fodder and the dangers of bad weather at lambing time. Upon reading how, on one bitter night, Isaac Fletcher's "*piss froze in the pots under the beds"*, Mark Clark joked how his sweaty work overalls once became like cardboard after a night in their freezing cold porch. There were plenty of stories like this, comparing past with present. Similarly, like the diarists, dabbling as they were in early amateur meteorology, Mosser's contemporary farmers attempted to understand the day-to-day weather in the context of longer term patterns. Changes in the weather were discussed in terms of the frequency and intensity of extremes, as well as in more abstract notions of altered patterns and global warming. Ian Moor's observation that they get more rain in a day now than they used to get in a week when he was a child is not unlike the diarists' deference to local elders when attempting to assess the significance of particularly notable weather events. Here too there is a predilection to set the present against memories from the past.

Further similarities were found in the farmers' attitudes towards the weather. The eighteenth-century diarists' commentary was coloured by their Quaker faith. In keeping with contemporary attitudes, this manifested itself in the belief that the moderate British weather was an example of God's "providential benevolence to their country" (Golinski 2003, 21). Even after a challenging run of weather in 1795, Elihu Robinson remarked that "*some times seeming evils in the dispensations of providence are productive of substantial good!"* There was a philosophical emphasis on patience and submission. Bad weather was frequently met with the mantra that "*to reason right is to submit, & do our best"*. Such was the strength of this sentiment, it became a moral imperative: "*to murmur against ye weather can avail nothing & cannot be right"*. During our time in Mosser, there were plenty of murmurs against the weather. Indeed, when we went back to present a screening of the

film, some expressed worries that we might have portrayed them as a group of embittered moaners. Yet this was not the impression that they had conveyed to us.

The film is book-ended by two excerpts from interviews with Richard Vickers: at the beginning Richard says “I know sometimes you get a bit pissed off with it, and things aren't going right, and you can't see how it's going to add up, but you still have a really nice place to work that a lot of people would kill for”; at the end he states “we should never give up. Nah, just keep going, onwards and upwards”. Dotted across the landscape, the ruins of farms, outbuildings and broken machinery serve as long-standing physical reminders of what can happen when hope is not rewarded, and yet encapsulated in these two quotes is a mentality to carry on, come what may. It is not so much faith in God or providence that underlies this stoicism, but there is hope for a better future, afforded by belief that good weather is just around the corner, that economic cycles will eventually ease financial woes, or that global population pressure will force up the price of food. Patience remains an important virtue, even if submission may only be grudging.

Spaces

Amongst these clear connections between past and present, we began to see how the specific characteristics of the rural, upland setting engendered a special resonance within three distinct 'spaces': home/work, land/family, landscape/weather. In each of these spaces, we found connections where otherwise one might expect a degree of separation: in a place where the clock time of modern life confronts the rhythm of the seasons, and the farm acts as both business centre and centre of family life, there is a blurring between home and work; with farms supporting generations of the same family, and land itself the product of decades of investment, these interconnections extend to land and family – identities are written into and drawn from the land, whilst fortunes are invested in fields of crops, flocks of sheep and herds of cattle; finally, the reflections and comments within and about the diaries show that weather is and has been an integral part of life in Mosser – weather is engrained in the landscape.

Replete with tensions though they are, these spaces help to frame the experiences that connect people across 250 years of history. There are questions here about modernity and heritage. In the diarists' writings, Enlightenment ideals appear to clash with folklore and superstition. At one

moment they are embracing the new science of meteorology by purchasing barometers, at another they are harking back to a less rational past of weather proverbs and portents. It could be argued, following Latour and others, that this is pre-modernity, becoming modern, early modernity, non-modernity, improvement or enlightenment (Golinski 2007; Latour 1993; Tarlow 2007; Thomas 2004). A case could be made for each, but none of these categories sit perfectly. And if the experiences of the diarists are difficult to categorise, then what of those of the present day community? Contemporary Mosser might be subject to the vagaries of globalisation, electronic communication and changing demographics, but farming itself remains a traditional, local practice, conditioned by seasons and the soil. It is impacted by international agri-environment schemes, foreign markets, tourism and government regulations, but sun, wind and rain are still just as important in differentiating good years from bad. Is this late modernity, postmodernity, supermodernity, non-modernity or we-have-never-been-modernity, and what does each say about changing experiences of time and place (Auge 1995; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984)?

Does it even matter? Perhaps a resistance to categorisation simply reflects the fact that, as Harrison and Schofield (2010, chap. 5) suggest, a key feature of contemporary experience is the complicated relationship we have with the past. Heritage is made in the relationships between material social memory, and more than that, the process of researching and assembling heritage can be considered a means of "looking toward, and … taking responsibility for, the future" (Harrison 2015, 35). In Mosser we have combined filmmaking, photography, archaeology and landscape history to look at how, over the course of two centuries, different strands of modernity have developed, and how references to the past (and past weather) can, for example, be a beneficial source of wisdom or an unwanted brake on adaptability. Using filmmaking as an integral part of the research process, we have shown how the process of researching community heritage, of making the past relevant, can generate new perspectives on everyday life in the present. Potentially, therefore, one aim might be to orientate future research such that it strives more explicitly to have a transformational impact on the communities that we work with (cf. Johnston and Marwood 2017).

Conclusion

In Mosser, the process of filmmaking has been a powerful archaeological tool for excavating the contemporary past: it has enabled the community to connect with its past by exploring the

materiality of its present rendered in objects, the landscape, the biting wind and driving rain. Sensitively managed, filmmaking has the capacity to democratise the research process, in that members of the community are prompted to explore their own stories in their own words. Although this kind memory-telling recounts the well-worn and familiar, seen through the filmmaker's lens there is the propensity to reveal new and distanced perspectives that can make the familiar unfamiliar – ostensibly something that is valued by participants. By combining research on the contemporary past with research on the historical past, it is possible to start working between both time periods and timescales, exploring relationships between long-term processes and the experiences of those living in the midsts of change. One outcome of this has been to discover how, despite clear differences in social, economic and political settings, there are striking similarities between experiences of weather and farming in the eighteenth century and the present day. This says something about people's relationships with their landscape, the experience of modernity, and the depth and durability of farming heritage.

A Break in the Clouds can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/71799347

Primary Sources

Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London (RSS)
MS Box R3 – diaries and notebooks of Elihu Robinson

References

Allegue, L., S. Jones, B. Kershaw, and A. Piccini, eds. 2009. *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Auge, M. 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.

Bannerman, C., and C. McLaughlin. 2009. "Collaborative Ethics in Pratice-as-Research." In *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, edited by L. Allegue, S. Jones, B. Kershaw, and A. Piccini, 64–80. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barbash, I., and L. Taylor. 1997. *Cross Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bouch, C. M. L., and G. P. Jones. 1961. *A Short Economic and Social History of the Lake Counties, 1500-1830*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Clark, J., and J. Murdoch. 1997. "Local Knowledge and the Precarious Extension of Scientific Networks: A Reflection on Three Case Studies." *Sociologia Ruralis* 37 (1): 38–60. doi:10.1111/1467-9523.00035.

Crow, G. 2008. "Recent Rural Community Studies." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11 (2): 131–39. doi:10.1080/13645570801940848.

Golinski, J. 2003. "Time, Talk, and the Weather in Eighteenth-Century Britain." In *Weather, Climate, Culture*, edited by S. Strauss and B. Orlove, 17–38. Oxford: Berg.

———. 2007. *British Weather and the Climate of Enlightenment*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Harrison, R. 2015. "Beyond 'Natural' and 'Cultural' Heritage: Toward an Ontological Politics of Heritage in the Age of Anthropocene." *Heritage & Society* 8 (1): 24–42. doi:10.1179/2159032X15Z.00000000036.

Harrison, R., and J. Schofield. 2010. *After Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, D. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ingold, T. 2007. "Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (Special Issue): S19–38.

Ingold, T., and T. Kurttila. 2000. "Perceiving the Environment in Finnish Lapland." *Body & Society* 6 (3–4): 183–96.

Jameson, F. 1991. *Post-Modernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Janković, V. 2000. *Reading the Skies: A Cultural History of English Weather, 1650-1820*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Johnston, R., and K. Marwood. 2017. "Action Heritage: Research, Communities, Social Justice." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23 (9): 816–31. doi:10.1080/13527258.2017.1339111.

Latour, B. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lyotard, J. F. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

McIntosh, R. J., J. A. Tainter, and S. K. McIntosh. 2000. “Climate, History, and Human Action.” In *The Way the Wind Blows: Climate, History, and Human Action*, edited by R. J. McIntosh, J. A. Tainter, and S. K. McIntosh, 1–44. New York: Columbia University Press.

Pillatt, T. 2012a. “From Climate and Society to Landscape and Weather.” *Archaeological Dialogues* 19 (1): 29–41.

Pillatt, T. 2012b. “Experiencing Climate: Finding Weather in Eighteenth Century Cumbria.” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 19 (4): 564–81.

Pillatt, T. 2016. “Life in the Weather-World: Examining an Eighteenth-Century ‘ecological Perspective.’” *World Archaeology* 48 (4): 586–602. doi:10.1080/00438243.2016.1220869.

Rantala, O., A. Valtonen, and V. Markuksela. 2011. “Materializing Tourist Weather: Ethnography on Weather-Wise Wilderness Guiding Practices.” *Journal of Material Culture* 16 (3): 285–300. doi:10.1177/1359183511413646.

Robertson, I. J., and D. Webster. 2016. “People of the Croft: Visualising Land, Heritage and Identity.” *Cultural Geographies*, 1–8. doi:10.1177/1474474016659235.

Searle, C. E. 1993. “Customary Tenants and the Enclosure of the Cumbrian Commons.” *Northern History* 29: 126–53.

Strauss, S, and B Orlove, eds. 2003. *Weather, Climate, Culture*. Oxford: Berg.

Tarlow, S. 2007. *The Archaeology of Improvement in Britain, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thomas, J. 2004. *Archaeology and Modernity*. London: Psychology Press.

Vannini, P., D. Waskul, S. Gottschalk, and T. Ellis-Newstead. 2012. “Making Sense of the Weather: Dwelling and Weathering on Canada’s Rain Coast.” *Space and Culture* 15 (4): 361–80. doi:10.1177/1206331211412269.

Veale, L., G. Endfield, and S. Naylor. 2014. “Knowing Weather in Place: The Helm Wind of Cross Fell.” *Journal of Historical Geography* 45: 25–37. doi:10.1016/j.jhg.2014.03.003.

Whyte, I. 2003. *Transforming Fell and Valley: Landscape and Parliamentary Enclosure in North West England*. Bristol: CNWRS.

Winchester, A. J. L., ed. 1994. *The Diary of Isaac Fletcher of Underwood, Cumberland, 1756-1781*. Bridgend: Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

Figures and Captions

1. Mosser Gate Farm.

A place on the margins, Mosser contains a scatter of farms nestled on the northwestern edge of the Lake District National Park. The land lies exposed to the weather blowing in from the Irish Sea.

2.Butter moulds kept by Geoff and Ella Cole in their home at Bramley farm.

When talking about their local and family history, many of the participants were keen to augment their stories with the objects and heirlooms stored in their houses.

3. Richard Vickers holds an old cattle passport for one of his cows at Mosser Heights Farm.

The European Union introduced cattle passports in 1998 as part of the Cattle Tracing System. Farmers, past and present, repeatedly voiced their frustration at being mercy to events and people far beyond their control.

4. Richard Vickers holds a folder containing cattle passports for his cows at Mosser Heights Farm.

Red tape and government interference was frequently derided, and yet the farmers remain largely dependent on the subsidies such interference brings.

5. Jane Clark firmly holds a sheep during weighing and vaccinations at Mosser Mains Farm.

Sheep contribute a greater part to the agricultural regime compared to 250 years ago, when more crops were grown.

6. Family photo of Alan Clark, of Mosser Mains farm.

Alan's father ran the farm before him; he was a respected judge at county shows. Relationships with landscape often spanned multiple generations.

7. Pages in the memory book kept at Mosser Mains farm, containing newspaper clippings and Alan's father's judge badges from county shows.

Family identity is directly related to people’s sense of home and the time and work they have invested in the landscape.

8. View over Loweswater from the top of Mosser Heights farm.

Mosser's farms were freeholds in the eighteenth century, thus distancing the inhabitants from the battles over customary tenancies that engulfed their neighbours in Loweswater and beyond.

9. Inside St. Michael's Chapel, Mosser, built in 1773 and renovated in 1923-4.
The chapel was likely built to extend the reach of the Anglican church to the townships of Blindbothel, Whinfell and Mosser, which together comprised a hotbed of Quakerism in the late eighteenth century.

10. Photo from the Moore family album at Fellside Farm showing current owner Ian's sister on a Shetland pony.
"We didn't know it was in foal, so it was a bit of a surprise the next morning."

11. Fellside Farm.
The land at Fellside extends up steep slopes onto Mosser Fell, where an enterprising farmer once made the potentially controversial decision to plough on common land beyond the head dyke. At this altitude, any crop would lie exceedingly exposed to the prevailing weather.

12. Old machinery at Mosser Heights Farm.
Old and broken machinery is dotted around the landscape like rusted monuments to abandoned ways of working.

13. The Quaker Meeting House at Pardshaw Hall, in the township next to Mosser.
The Meeting House was the social and religious focal point in the lives of Elihu Robinson and Isaac Fletcher.

14. Elihu Robinson's diary, showing entries from 1784 (image copyright: The Religious Society of Friends in Britain).
Weather plays a prominent role in the historical diaries, linking religious belief and daily farming life.

15. Signpost on the road leading towards Mosser.
Cockermouth, 3¾ miles away, hosts the local livestock market and was an equally important market for Fletcher's produce in the eighteenth century.

16. Jane and Alan Clark outside their farmhouse at Mosser Mains.
Where the clock time of modern life confronts the rhythm of the seasons, the farm acts as both business centre and centre of family life.

17. Richard and Amanda Vickers with Richard's parents outside their farmhouse at Mosser Heights.

Whereas it was once expected that younger members of the family would grow up and take on the family farm, the farmers today worry that too often young people are drawn away to university, the cities and other lives.

18. Viewing the film at Mosser Mains Farm in February 2014.

Our screening in Mosser presented an opportunity for criticism and change, and yet despite worries about how we might portray them, the community was happy with what we had co-produced.

19. The ruins of the old Gillbrow farm, likely abandoned in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

Across the landscape, ruins speak of the area's deep farming heritage, and yet are a stark reminder of the precarity of rural life, where the changing weather, global economics and distanced political decisions present regular challenges.

20. The remains of Milldam cottage.

The diarists' Quaker faith instilled a stoicism, born of a patient submission to God's will. Despite numerous worries about the future, reinforced by brutal experience and set amongst material warnings from the past, today's farmers also remain stoic, holding out hope for better times.