

Muker, Swaledale - Conservation Area Character Appraisal

Designated – 26 March 2002



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1. Introduction

This character appraisal has been prepared as part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority's Conservation Area Strategy. It has been prepared by Blaise Vyner Heritage and Arts Consultancy and follows on from a public meeting held at Muker on 15th August 2000, and a guided walk conducted on September 1st, 2000.

2. Location and setting

Situated above the north bank of the Straw Beck, just west of its confluence with the River Swale, Muker now takes the form of a lower village located along the north side of the valley road which adjoins an earlier settlement nucleus on a slightly raised terrace to the north. The roadside settlement looks out across the narrow valley of upper Swaledale to the south, while the upper village is much more enclosed, being characterised by narrow openings and passages. For several centuries this has been an important settlement central to the upper dale. Its location on the north side of the valley may have been dictated by an early north-south communication route which traversed the valley and crossed the watercourse at this point. The nature of the topography here, however, ensured that this bridging point never became the focus for settlement, which instead was based on an adjacent natural platform overlooking the beck.

3. Archaeological and historical background to the settlement

The settlement name is Norse, and means 'narrow acre', implying a small area of cultivated land (Fleming 1998, 45). The earliest recorded evidence for occupation in and around Muker takes the form of a skeleton found, with flints, on Muker Common in the early 20th

century. This has now been lost, but the details suggest a burial of Bronze Age date - perhaps belonging to the early part of the second millennium BC. Although Swaledale contains a variety of earthworks, many of which appear to be evidence for field systems of Romano-British date, there is little earthwork evidence for early agricultural or settlement activity in the immediate vicinity of Muker. Slight traces of former earthwork field boundaries may be discerned underlying the field system to the east of the village and south of the present main road.

4. Economic Development

Agriculture

Agriculture continued to underpin other economic activities in Muker as elsewhere in the dales. During the 1830s there was a series of bad harvests, and sheep rot outbreak. Larger farms increasingly grew cereals during this period, following the 1815 Corn Laws. However, during the second half of the 19th century mixed farming which included the cultivation of potatoes, turnips, swedes, oats, and corn was being abandoned for the pastoral farming which dominates the area today. The agricultural round was reflected in Muker show, held in September on a field up the lane past church, while the annual tup sale took place in October, in the field below the vicarage.

Mining and other economic activities

The early 19th century - the period of the Napoleonic Wars and the Peninsular War (1808-14) - was the period of greatest mining activity, evidenced in Muker by an increasing number of cottages and workshops. From the mid 1820s, however, the price of lead dropped and there was a continuing decline in the industry. Despite the trend, new mines were opened and individual mines had periods of great prosperity, with something of a revival in Crimean war 1853-56.

Muker was a major centre for both lead mining and hand knitting by the late 18th century. A variety of buildings must be associated with these industries, and the period 1795-1815 has been shown by the Garth diaries to be one of continuous rebuilding throughout the upper dale. The King's Head group built on the south side of the old green area may have been connected with the storage of wool, its distribution ('putting out') to private houses for spinning and knitting, and the collection of finished articles before transportation to Richmond, the main market centre. The 1851 census shows that hand knitting was then still a commercial industry in the village.

Lead mining was in decline by the middle of the 19th century and ceased to provide any wealth for the community by the early 20th century. Even by 1891 the market, which had probably been established in the 18th century, had shrunk to just two butchers stalls. Farming remained the principal occupation, together with maintenance of the moorland for shooting. From the late 19th century inns and tea shops increasingly catered for visitors and holiday-makers, and by the 1920s tourists were an unremarkable sight anywhere in the Yorkshire Dales (Hartley 1950, 11).

5. Settlement structure and fabric

Settlement layout

The present settlement plan at Muker has been consolidated by the formalisation of the river crossing and the road along its north bank. The earliest settlement at Muker, however, may have been sited on a platform on the hillside overlooking the beck. It is not clear to what extent this was a nucleated settlement, nor whether there was originally a green here; the church and the remains of a 17th century domestic building lie to the eastern side of this possible early focal point. The church was rebuilt in 1580, when burials were permitted, and from then onwards settlement consolidated around an open green area, itself later encroached upon.

Formerly the main communication route along the upper dale between Muker and Thwaite may well have cleaved to the north side of the Straw Beck, leaving Muker on the line now maintained by a terrace of houses which extends from the southern edge of the upper settlement. The present bridge over Muker or Straw Beck was rebuilt in 1907, on a site likely to be that of an early river crossing, as old routes, including one from the north-east and Scotland, converge here. The limited amount of level ground along the beck, and its tendency to flooding, ensured that the beck crossing never became the principal focus of settlement, although occupation along the beck side, perhaps begun in the 18th century, was extended and consolidated by the latter part of the 19th century.

House plans developed from a single room deep to two full rooms to front and rear on two or three storeys; both building types are represented along the road overlooking the beck. Examination of the exteriors so far has revealed houses mostly dating from the middle years of the 18th to the later 19th century, with several examples revealing the addition of extra bays to houses, which were probably built to accommodate landless miners or family members. These buildings are often under a continuous roofline, suggesting a tradition

dating from the later medieval cruck construction. Two houses in the old Post Office group, Ivy Cottage and Ansleigh, as well as part of the north-west terrace, have almost square window openings dating from before the arrival of full sashes in vertically proportioned openings in the late 18th century or, in this instance, probably early 19th century. The linear ground plans contrast with the L-shaped plan of the old Queen's Head and other buildings, and the irregular development of Swales Farm. Earlier features may survive within these and other buildings in Muker.

Building materials

Buildings in Muker are almost wholly constructed from local stone with stone slate roofs, with considerable variation in the character of the material reflecting the various methods of its acquisition. Good quality dressed quarried stone is visible, for example, in Bridge House, while regularly shaped blocks with hammered surfaces, as seen in the former Kings Head, may well be the by-product of lead mining, as also may be the poorer quality slabs used for workshops and outhouses of 19th century date. Two-storey houses, whether farmhouses or those built for lead miners, have coursed rubble walling and stone window and door surrounds typical of the middle and later 18th century, together with kneelers and gable copings.

Other probable sources of stone included stream-beds and river banks, natural outcrops, field clearances and re-use from older buildings, as well as from formal quarries. Many walls now appear to be of dry-stone construction, although mortar is likely to have been used to render them draughtproof. Rendering is present on the three cottages of the Farmers Arms, and on Swales Farm and the former Queens Hotel, now obscuring the potentially interesting history of these latter two buildings. As elsewhere in the Dales, there is no evidence for the use of timber in any of the surviving buildings, while the relatively shallow pitch of the stone slate roofs suggests that these all post-date the use of thatch, which disappeared as a local roofing material in the mid-18th century. The majority of properties are fitted with sash-windows which in late 19th century photographs appear to have twelve or sixteen panes of glass, later reduced, and in the 20th century replaced by plate glass, with now perhaps 40% in synthetic framing materials.

Street furniture

Muker has little in the way of street furniture apart from a K6 style telephone box. An important aspect of the character and appearance of the village is the extent to which cobbled paths and yards link the public and private areas of the settlement. This local tradition of cobbling extends to the construction of small semi-circular aprons in front of several cottage doorways.

The old village pound or pinfeld, on the south side of the beck, adjacent to an open and relatively conspicuous area of recently established car parking, has been restored as a feature, although it is now somewhat overgrown.

Architectural and historical contribution of the existing buildings

There are four Listed Buildings in Muker village - the church, an old stone font near the church, the Literary Institute and its railings, and the telephone box.

The church of St Mary is unusual in being an Elizabethan church, built in 1580. It has rubble walls and may originally have been thatched. The bells are thought to have been brought from Ellerton Priory after the Dissolution. Surviving fragments of 14th-century stonework might well support the reference to the existence of an earlier chapel at Muker, associated with the dairy farm belonging to Rievaulx Abbey. The three-stage tower is

probably later and a 1719 date, found on the four-centred arch of the chamfered inner doorway, may well commemorate its erection. The beaded wall plate and other roof timbers were re-used when the roof pitch was altered for a continuous stone slate roof in 1761. Evidence of other repairs and renovations are recorded on the rain-water head casting (1793) and the entrance porch (1849) which incorporates an older sundial. Further restoration took place in 1891. An 18th century font stands three metres south of the church porch.

The Literary Institute, opened in 1869, displays a variety of architectural features which make it the most distinctive building in the village. It is of two-storeys, built into the steep bank between the low road and the upper village level, the lower room entered from the south, and the hall above entered from the imposing west front. It is built of coursed rubble with ashlar dressings, having a slate roof with coped gables, kneelers and a single gable stack, and finished with quoins and raised bands. The west front is topped with a curved Dutch gable with a ball finial and has a projecting porch with a plain flat hood sheltering a round-arched doorway reached by a flight of six steps. A length of railing with spearhead finials surmounts the stone retaining wall for the steps. The two-storey south front has a round-headed doorway with four-panel door and a fanlight in plain ashlar surround with keystone and moulded impost; the two round-headed glazing bar sashes to the right have similar surrounds. The upper hall is lit by three pairs of plain sashes in ashlar surrounds with distinctive shouldered heads. The telephone box is a K6 type, a design of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott.

Aside from such formal contributions, much of the character of Muker derives from the great variety of building types, all apparently in use during the latter part of the 19th century, which make up the present settlement. These include three former beer houses or inns, workshops and stables, hay barns with end byres, two vicarages, a lock-up and courtroom, the school, cart shelters, a general store, and probable warehousing, as well as farms and domestic accommodation. Knitting 'factories', where garments were finished, are known to have existed before 1800, often employing the poorest members of the community and one or more buildings with taking-in doors and light to upper floors may have been built for this industry. Small single-room workshops or store-houses, with external stone steps to a separate upper floor, and sometimes large windows, may also have served the lead and knitting industries.

The main road through the village is flanked by an intermittent row of buildings which present significant contrasts to those found in the upper village. Most of the buildings that have noteworthy ornament or architectural detailing in Muker are situated along this centre section of the main road, and most were established by, or associated with, religious or educational institutions.

The beckside itself is occupied only by a few 19th century outbuildings opposite the Farmers Arms, and the recent and uninspiring public toilets. The absence of development along the southern side of the road gives it an open appearance and character which contrasts strongly with the enclosed character of the upper village to the north. Settlement by the beckside took place along the drier, north, side of the road, with Muker Literary Institute and its attached wall and railings of 1867-8, and the 1870 Board School suggesting the period of final consolidation of this linear frontage to Carway Bottom.

The Literary Institute is the most elaborate building in the village, and its prominent position, on the steep slope at the junction of Carway Bottom and the path up to the upper village, creates a memorable focal point, from both close-up and a distance, and adds considerably to the character of the townscape. Its prominence reflects the importance of the library and meeting room to the village and the dale beyond, and it is today the building most recognisable as 'Muker' to visitors. The ornate Italianate style, with keyed round arches to

doorways and windows and an ornate gable, reflect the stylistic preference for such buildings in the 1860s. The Institute originally housed a large library, together with newspapers in a reading room, as well as providing a meeting room for lectures and discussions. The upper room is now used as a practice room for Muker Silver Band.

Carway Bottom now has a wider range of buildings, with a wider range of functions, than can be found elsewhere in Muker. Development along this road is sharply defined by the northern side of the road, the rising hillside behind, and endstop buildings to east and west. The west end of the settlement along Carway Bottom is effectively marked by a 19th century house set, unusually, at an angle to the main road; at its roadside gable stone stairs lead to a first floor store or workshop. The bridge over the Straw Beck acts as eastern endstop.

Fronting Carway Bottom is a series of buildings with considerable variation in origin and construction, a number now given over to commercial use, showing how with the gradual abandonment of most former commercial premises in the upper village, public facilities have now become concentrated along the main thoroughfare. A western group includes the 1934 Methodist church, which replaced one of 1845 outside the west end of the village, which is now two houses. The former school, now the Old School tea and craft shop, complete with Kearton memorials set in the outer wall, dates from 1849, with a gabled wing and bellcote of 1870. Window mullions which are reputed to exist in the rear wall, are a possibly remnant of the 1678 endowed school, but these can no longer be seen because of a recent extension to the building. Little is known of interior features, but Strawbeck, now Swaledale Woollens, a two-storey house with 'WBR 1815' over the door, is said to have painted cartouches of flower garlands on interior walls, with one upstairs dated 1832 (Hall 1996) - the initials refer to William Reynard, a schoolmaster who came to Muker c.1800.

The central group of buildings along Carway Bottom is the point where the upper and lower villages of Muker meet. Set back from the frontage, the Farmer's Arms presents an interesting contrast in alignment and aspect. This rendered building has probably developed from an early 19th century row of cottages, it fronts the only significant area of public space on the becks side, and is a reminder that settlement along the road once had a more piecemeal appearance. The impression of horizontal and vertical depth to the settlement is continued by the later 18th century former vicarage, which has a triangular pediment over the entrance; beyond to the east a sloping open garden area reveals glimpses of the upper village, cut off once again by a tall building - once a shop which probably included warehouse space - which has a neat apron of cobbles at the door. The mass of the Carway Wall extends the vertical alignments to flank the path to the upper village.

Continuing east along Carway Bottom, beyond the path opening, a row of smaller domestic and agricultural or industrial buildings occupies the north side of the road between the Literary Institute and Bridge House and re-asserts the closure of the street frontage. These buildings are probably late 18th century in date and demonstrate a common building tradition, but with considerable variation in construction and finish. The row includes domestic accommodation as well as store-houses. The orientation of the row follows the line of the track leading down from the upper village, suggesting that it may have been truncated by the construction of the Institute in 1867. Beyond these, Bridge House was originally built as a shooting lodge, parts of which may be incorporated in the re-built and extended structure. This, or a small house by the bridge, may be Muker Lodge, described by the naturalist author Richard Kearton, when he stayed there as a young man in the late 1870s, as 'standing gaunt and bare' between the road and the graveyard.

The central concentration of frontages at the Carway Bottom provides a physical as well as a visual link between the lower and upper villages of Muker. Adjacent to the east gable of the Farmers Arms, the steep narrow path known locally as The Ashes leads to the western

end of the upper village and to two terraces of cottages dating from the mid-18th to mid-19th century. The western row has been rebuilt with larger windows in the late 20th century, although its basic shape and character has been maintained. A stable or workshop at the east end survives unaltered, retaining some 19th century timber features, any cement pointing to the walls having been washed away, although a cement core is probably present. The second terrace comprises a large mid-18th century house with square windows, perhaps a substantial farm, which had been later sub-divided and to which small end cottages, one with a large ridge stack, have been added in the 19th century. The subdivisions may reflect the development of housing as a result of partible inheritance, combined with the impact of lead mining on the local economy. A further terrace, east of the track leading north-west to the later vicarage, originated - as indicated by a surviving byre at the south end - as agricultural buildings. These may have been associated with Lane Farm, but have been rebuilt in recent years to provide domestic accommodation. The three terraces combine to provide a firm north-western and northern boundary to the upper village. This is in contrast with the eastern and southern edges, which are made up from a much more varied arrangement of buildings.

Above the southern scarp edge is a fine 18th century house which faces east, with views to the church and down the dale. The house has large quoins and is constructed of carefully dressed coursed stone with diminishing courses, with windows which are set well inside the gable walls, suggesting large internal stacks. The front door has a plain stone surround set left of centre, suggesting that originally it opened directly into a living room. Later features are the taller windows with shallow cills and lintels and no jambs, and the stone gutter brackets. The visual interest of this house is heightened by the big silver gray quoins which contrast with the walling stone, which has an attractive ferruginous colour.

The former King's Head Inn stands adjacent on the edge of the upper village level, facing south and overlooking the centre of the Carway Bottom. It comprises a long domestic range, two rear wings, and attached barns and outbuildings. The main façade was re-built in the mid-20th century and consists of evenly coursed stone, which contrasts with the irregular finish of the older masonry. A second parallel rear wing, now domestic, is of at least three building phases and is built against the northern gable of the mid-18th century house. A low range of outbuildings and workshops on the west side of the block contributes to the enclosed aspect of the upper village and presents a large expanse of heavy stone tiled roof, one of the more obvious indicators of former industry in and around Muker. This is one of several locations around the upper village where contrasts in light, space and building materials combine to provide a sense of drama.

The terraces and buildings bound an area which may once have been a green, in the centre of which is a small group of buildings which may have included a former Post Office, with a large external stack on the north wall and fine roof kneelers indicating a late 17th century house modified in the 18th century. This group also illustrates that, where they exist, front gardens in Muker are characteristically small and defined by low walls, one here surmounted with iron railings with a small apron of turf outside. Other buildings have a more workaday character: a two-storey building with a first-floor door, blocked window and a lean-to on the south side appears to be another encroachment onto the 'green' opposite Swales Farm; part of this one is remembered as the village lock-up. Small outbuildings with stone steps up to a first-floor doorway are a characteristic building type and, while often thought of as stables, may have been built - and certainly were used - for a variety of purposes. Such buildings could have separate tenancies for first and ground floors, and could supply single-room accommodation for two uses at a time when building land was in demand. In the south of this central area, and west of 'Queens' - the Old Queen's Head, Hylands is a fairly small house with L-shape plan, the north section has a tall plain stone fireplace surround and a step down to the southern section, which may have been a second cottage or the surviving earlier element.

6. Existing land use in and around the village, public and other open spaces

Muker comprises two separate settlement elements: a linear lower village along the east-west through road, and an upper village on the platform behind this to the north. There are considerable differences between these two elements in terms of building types and function, and in the use of space. Further, smaller-scale, contrasts can also be observed at various points within the settlement.

Muker is usually approached along the east-west valley road, a route that follows the Straw Beck along Carway Bottom, past public facilities, which now include toilets, a public house, gift shop, and a guest house. Here the traveller is given the impression of a narrow linear settlement, and has only occasional glimpses - the church tower, the uphill entry past the Literary Institute - to a more private upper village beyond, where the church and Village Hall are facilities for the community rather than the visitor.

The best views from Muker are to be had from the openings provided by the roads, tracks, and paths that radiate from the village. Despite its open character, views from the lower linear settlement have always been restricted by the steeply rising ground along the Carway Bottom. Looking across to the south side of the valley, views are now increasingly foreshortened during the summer by tree growth along the beck. The valley sides provide a constriction to the west, so that the best long views are from around the churchyard eastwards down Swaledale. From the upper village there are glimpses into the settlement below, as well as wider views across and along the valley from the opening above the Literary Institute, and the track crossing the upper end of the Ashes.

The widening valley and the road along the beck give an initial impression of openness which is denied by the limited amount of obvious public space along and off Carway Bottom. While public space in and around the upper village is at first glance more plentiful than elsewhere, this is limited in area, comprising small irregularly shaped areas between and around buildings. From these areas paved or grassed passages lead to more private closes.

Most visitors to Muker arrive by car along the valley road from the east. Parking space to accommodate visitors drawn to the village has been provided on the south side of the beck, adjacent to the old village pound and the bridge over the Straw Beck. Inconspicuously located, this is in fact an ideal starting place to an exploration of Muker. From this large and obviously public area the visitor is led along Carway Bottom and into the upper village by the Literary Institute, then onto the heart of the settlement, a route which becomes progressively more restricted, private, and enclosing.

From the car park there is a view across and into the open linear settlement along Carway Bottom, behind which the buildings of the upper village can only be glimpsed. The limited view combines with the restricted access to encourage most visitors westwards along the becksides, a preference reflected in the presence of pub, tea shop, and other facilities, and emphasised by more informal car parking along the roadside at the west end of the village.

The less obviously publicly accessible upper village retains several working farms, and it is from this tightly enclosed settlement that paths and tracks follow the line of old routeways to lead mines and ore processing sites and are now popular footpaths for visitors, providing fine views over the village and dale. This area retains much of the character associated with the mid nineteenth century economy of farms and leadmining.

A first impression is that both the lower and the upper village is characterised by rows of buildings set east-west, facing south to maximise access to sunlight on the south-facing valley side. Along the becksides this terrace effect is largely the result of amendment to, and

infilling between older buildings, while more coherent terraces can be found bounding the west and north-west side of the upper village. However, L-shaped and other irregularly shaped buildings, or agglomerations of buildings, are also a feature of Muker, and most of the buildings on the southern and eastern side of the upper village are of this kind, as exemplified by Swales Farm. Infilling buildings on what may once have been a village green are of a similar plan.

A series of contrasts is presented between the obvious linear arrangements of buildings such as those seen along Carway Bottom, or the west terrace, and less regular agglomerations such as those seen around southern and eastern side of the upper village. Strong contrasts also exist between the extent of public or open spaces along Carway Bottom, in the becksides car park, or around the central 'green' area, and semi-private areas like The Ashes and paved areas around Swales Farm.

Buildings along Carway Bottom and in the upper village have gardens or crofts enclosed by low walls, but these tend to be small, while others have no clearly defined holdings, but instead have variously sized aprons of cobbles or turf. The long triangle of steeply sloping land leading down to the foot of the Car Wall from the front of the old King's Head, and the garden to the front of Swales Farm, are among the exceptions which emphasise the general absence of private garden space associated with the older buildings.

Because only the north side of the beck is built up there is an open character to the lower village along Carway Bottom which contrasts with the enclosed character of the upper village. The linearity of the settlement along the becksides reflects the contours of the valley side, and is further emphasised by the relative uniformity of the frontages and roof lines. The climb to the upper village past the Literary Institute or up The Ashes is past and towards a series of jagged rooflines, most often seen against the sky. This distinction between low-lying settlement along the beck and the upper village to the north is further emphasised by the mass of the Car Wall and the rising garden area to its west.

The enclosed character of upper settlement is maintained by the terraces of buildings on the north-west and northern sides, although, as residents readily attest, openings to the south afford both views and an entry for the elements. More haphazard arrangements of buildings to the south and east of the upper village also serve to close in these sides. Although domestic structures here are more widely spaced, workshops, stores, and outbuildings serve to complete the closure and are particularly important in contributing to the enclosed character of this part of the village.