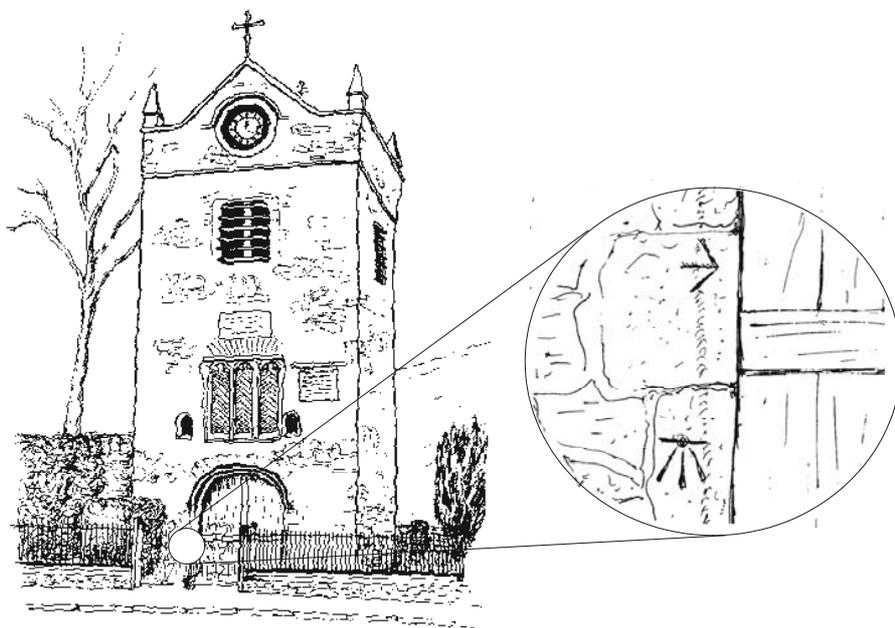


Was there a Staveley Flood about 1580?

Joe Scott Oct. 2000



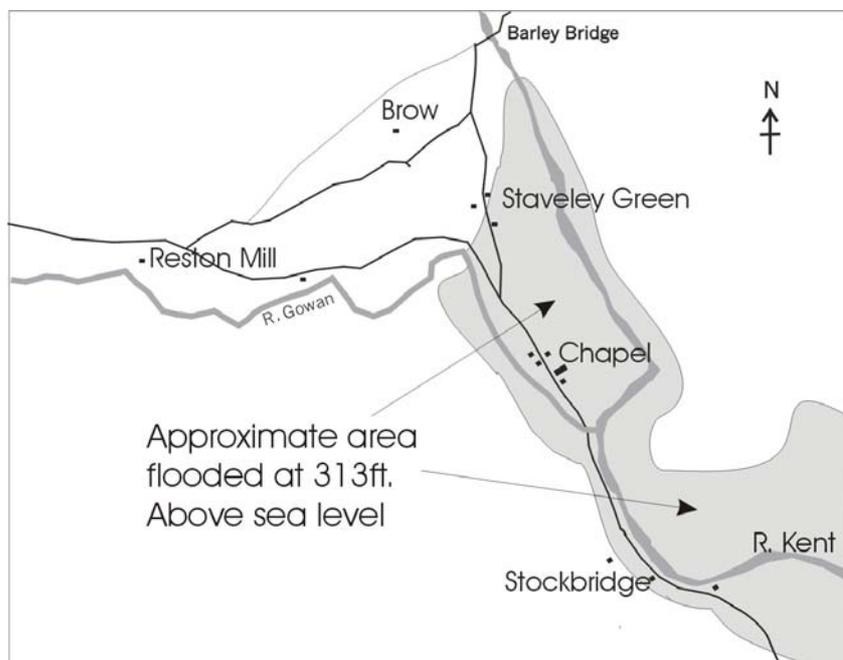
Ings at divers seasons flowe and runne soe forcible that no traveller can passe without great danger and also at another place called Staveley Green but most especially between Staveley Church and Kendall when the saide waters crossing the way to Kendall and meeting the river called Kente many tymes overflowing the bankes thereof and rysing so abundantlie that men dwelling on both sides of the hie way purposing to take their naturale rest in bedd hath been in greate danger of drowning, in so much that if the speedy helpe of

good neighbours had not been, 11 men women and children had perished. Whereof some for refuge was carried into the Chapell there of Staveley as can testify the same Gabriel Noble, John Baitman Geo. Birkhead and others more. This water will divers tymes be so monstrous that the force thereof hath carried away greate logges of tymber lying in the way side. And at the place called Noble Yeate [near Stockbridge] burst upp the hiewaye of great deepness that the inhabitants thereabouts were constrained to bestowe great labour and

In the stonework of St Margarets' Tower, to the left of the ancient doorway is the bench mark cut there by the ordnance surveyors in the 1850s. It marks the height of 311.5 feet above sea level. 17 inches above it is another more roughly cut arrow pointing to the right (see drawing, above). Who put it there and what does it mark?

One possibility is that it marks the water level of a notable flood. The old churchyard was not far above river level – “In wet weather water stood in the graves.” (Bulmer's Directory 1885) But there is evidence that things were a great deal worse in 1588. Until the 18th century there were no mill dams to control the waters of the Kent, and it was nobody's business to clear gravel banks and debris that could cause flooding of this notoriously variable river. On 30th June 1588 48 Staveley men signed the following petition asking the Bishop to allow marriages, baptisms and burials to take place at Staveley Chapel on the grounds that the journey to the Parish Church in Kendal was often so difficult.

“...The waters of Reston [the Gowan] coming forth of ..Hugill.... doth at a place called



charges to repaire the same before any could pass there. ...Also the inhabitants of Kentmire and another part of Overstaveley by reason of the overflowing of Kent bursting down the bridge called New Bridge [*Barley Bridge?*] hath been divers tymes constreyened to carry the dead bodies out of the hie way through men's fields to the greate dismaye of the owners. Likewise in the season of winter we are marvelouslye vexed with tempestuous stormes and abundance of snowe stopping our lanes with marvelous driftes soe that noe man may passe to Kendall with any carriage but in great danger to perishe. As for our young and weak infants whom we have been constrained to bring to Kendall for the occasion of baptism, how many have miscarried partly by the scorching heat of summer and partly with the perishing cold of winter, their sorrowful parents can beare witness and record and testimony thereof. We the foresaide inhabitants have sett our handes. Made the xxxth of June 1588.

Henry Feeld
Henry Stavlay
Robert Dawson
Christopher Shephard

This is an emotional plea, no doubt highly exaggerated. The Bishop rejected it and Staveley folk had to wait another 70 years to get the rights they were asking for. But some of the details have a persuasive exactness.

In particular the claim that eleven people living near the Chapel had to take refuge there is supported by the names of witnesses. The houses in Staveley at the time would be single storey thatched cottages, and water reaching anywhere near the mark on the tower would certainly endanger people sleeping in cottages on what is now Main St. Of course it would flood the Chapel too, but, unlike the cottages the Chapel had an upper floor, and the eleven people flooded out could scramble up the spiral stair to safety.

It seems reasonably likely that someone made the mark on the tower to remind people of this event. Of course he would make it after the waters had gone down and might well exaggerate their height. The mark could also have been put there after one of the many other floods that must have taken place in the six centuries that the tower has stood there. If you can think of any other explanation and find evidence for it, do let the Society know.



Kendal Road flooded about 1936. From a photograph in the Society's collection. The road at this point is only 303 ft above sea-level, so even if the water was a foot deep it was still nine feet below the flood level of the 1580s.