

WHERE FOLK TALES BEGAN

Hill Top, Ealinghearth, Haverthwaite, Cumbria LA12 8JR

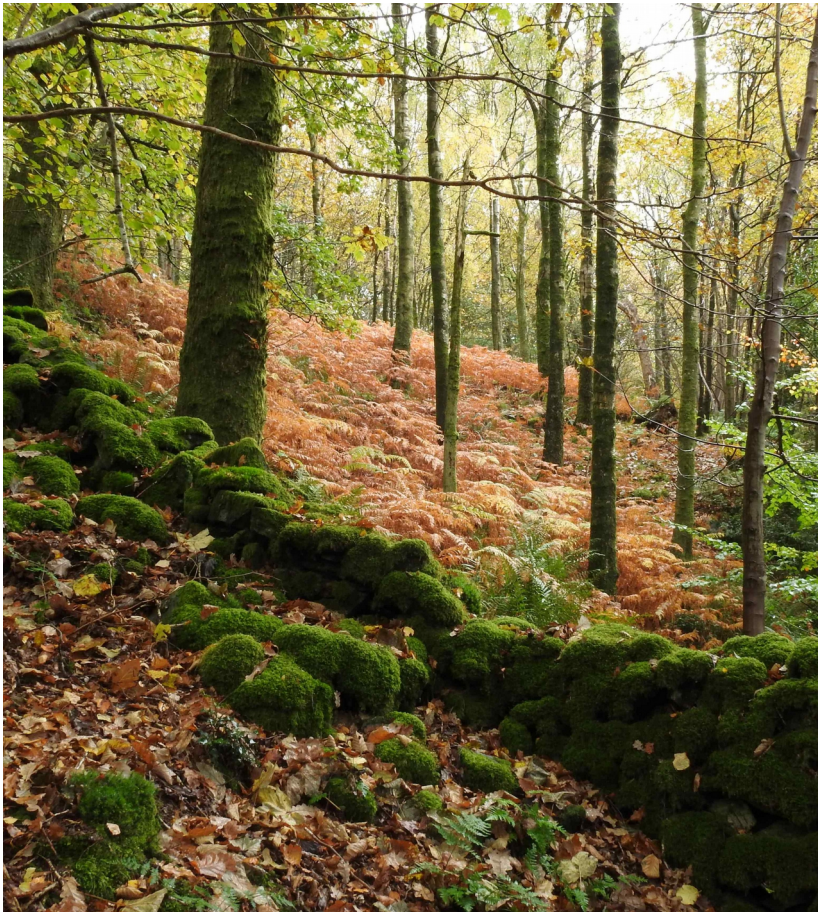
Stephen Sykes

In *The Curious Case of High Ealinghearth* (Mixed Moss, 2021) I discussed Arthur Ransome's proposed change of name for Hill Top, the house which he acquired in 1960 and which turned out to be his final home with Evgenia. Yet whilst Arthur was clearly keen to see Hill Top renamed “High Ealinghearth” (after the tiny hamlet of Ealinghearth of which the farmhouse is an outlying member), even specifying the new name in the purchase conveyance, Hill Top's historic name prevailed – a singularly curious occurrence inviting speculation!

Though “High Ealinghearth” was consigned to obscurity, the name of the hamlet itself deserves some scrutiny. In fact, it has an association which the charcoal burners of *Swallows and Amazons* may well have recognised. Indeed, if Ransome had been aware of the origin of Ealinghearth's name then that may perhaps go some way to explaining his choice of new name for Hill Top, though not necessarily his reason for the change. Yet he made no mention in his diaries to suggest such. Perhaps this is not surprising as the origin of *Ealinghearth* is little known even to locals, though I'm sure it would have delighted him, as I'm equally certain would our related discoveries within the nine acres of largely wooded grounds which Hill Top now enjoys.

First, some background. Not long after we purchased Hill Top, we acquired around an acre of woodland lying immediately to the south of the house, with the intention of protecting this aspect of Hill Top and

ensuring its long-term future. The woodland was owned by a neighbour, Patricia Booth, who lived down the road in one of the tiny cluster of cottages forming the hamlet, and whose father, Dr Rupert Hill, had once been Ransome's GP in nearby Haverthwaite. In the early 1960s, Dr Hill acquired considerable woodland holdings locally, including the discrete woodland adjacent to Hill Top known as Backhouse Brow, of which we now owned an acre.



Enormously overgrown with brambles where our beck runs off into the woodland, we set about clearing a way in. It soon became apparent that a previous owner of Hill Top had used the near woodland as a convenient site to unburden themselves of glass and broken pottery of all descriptions – including old-fashioned bottles for old-fashioned remedies (and beer). Now, it may be stretching matters, but we have one distinctively pristine blue example embossed “Bromo-Seltzer, Emerson Drug Co.” and, of course, Ransome's stomach was both perpetually problematic and relentlessly exacerbated. I merely state the facts and leave any inference to others!

Following Patricia's passing in 2018, we were offered the opportunity of acquiring the rest of the woodland, and in December 2019 we became the proud owners of Backhouse Brow in its entirety of around seven and a half acres. With the road acting as its western boundary, the woodland directly connects Hill Top down to the collection of cottages in Ealinghearth. Before this ultimate purchase, we hadn't explored the woodland beyond what we previously owned, and it was difficult to see into its depths from the road, not least because of its astonishing height gain. The interior therefore came as an utter surprise.

Backhouse Brow can be identified as having existed continuously since at least 1600 and, although it may once have been managed, it retains native trees that are likely to have regenerated naturally. As such, it is designated Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland, the planting of woodland having been uncommon before that date. Such woodland therefore derives from the original natural forest, and in the case of the Lake District represents reforestation following the end of the last Ice Age some ten thousand years ago. A highly prized though much diminished resource, they are unique and complex communities of plants, fungi, insects and other microorganisms, and are therefore also designated a priority habitat for conservation.



Coppiced sycamores in Backhouse Brow

With its precipitously rocky and unevenly boulder-strewn nature, Backhouse Brow is distinctly different from adjacent woodlands (also designated ancient, both semi-natural and replanted). Its historic management perhaps required a rather smaller-scale hands-on approach because of the particular characteristics of its terrain, certainly compared to its neighbours with their grander, less difficult tracks winding through their more uniformly spacious interiors. Though all are very much frequented by deer, the adjacent (and far larger) woodlands noticeably lack signs of the badger setts which can be found extensively in Backhouse Brow.

The Woodland Trust poetically says of ancient woodland, it is “home to myth and legend, where folk tales began”. And Backhouse Brow certainly fits the bill, with its mighty oaks and gigantic gnarled yews, sheer rock faces and vast dazzling carpets of bluebells in the springtime (the latter being a classic indicator of ancient woodland). Not to mention the evocative remnants of long-gone human activities which have left their mark on the landscape. For there, amongst the more



“Charcoal Burning at Bouth, 1908”, by Alfred Heaton Cooper

grandly soaring oaks and massively canopied yews, tower once-coppiced sycamores, evidencing this traditional form of woodland management historically used to satisfy the insatiable demand for charcoal to service the long-ago thriving iron industry in Backbarrow, just a half-mile away over the hillside.

According to Historic England's *Heritage at Risk Register*, “The surviving structures of Backbarrow Ironworks represent the best illustration nationally of iron-smelting technology development from the early C18 to the C20.” In fact, with a bloomery forge dating from around 1685 (coincidentally contemporaneous with Hill Top itself) and a state-of-the-art blast furnace from 1711, Backbarrow only ceased production in 1966, and charcoal was still used as a fuel as late as around 1920. In addition, the readily available supplies of charcoal and water power

attracted the establishment of gunpowder mills such as the one at nearby Low Wood (where Ransome spent time fishing on the River Leven) which continued production into the 1930s.

So, the burning of coppiced wood to create charcoal within Backhouse Brow isn't entirely surprising given the extensive historical industries which once dominated this area of the Lake District. Indeed, this was immortalised by Alfred Heaton Cooper in his painting *Charcoal Burning at Bouth, 1908*, Bouth being the small village just a couple of miles from Hill Top. There must have been a time when smoke rising from the woodlands all around was a very common sight.

And if the distinctive tree re-growth of periodic coppice cut-back isn't clear enough, there are numerous archaeological remains left by the charcoal burners and their activities, virtually on Ransome's doorstep.

Long-disused trackways still clearly make their way up and across the woodland. Levelled spaces – known as pitsteads or platforms – for creating kilns or piles to burn charcoal remain in evidence. Ancient walls in various states of decay both encompass the woodland and subdivide it. Other walls, which start somewhere and lead nowhere, seemingly served a purpose which can no longer be determined. And most



An old trackway

evocatively of all, there are the more personal remnants of the lives of the charcoal burners themselves. In addition to a much-rusted shovel or two, can be found the remains of a more-or-less circular low stone wall, once the base of a charcoal burner's hut and, quite separately, the rather fine isolated stone remains of a hearth.

Huts would have a low wall made of stone or turf acting as a base above which a conical structure using long poles was created in the style of a wigwam. Luckily, the generally rocky nature of Backhouse Brow doesn't easily lend itself to turf cutting, and so the stones which were used remain for all to see. As Ransome himself describes in *Swallows and Amazons*:

“At the edge of the wood, not far from the smoking



Remains of the stone base of a charcoal burner's hut



Stone hearth

mound, there was a hut shaped like a round tent, but made not of canvas but of larch poles set up on end and all sloping together so that the longer poles crossed each other at the top. On the side of it nearest to the mound there was a doorway covered with a hanging flap made of an old sack. The sack was pulled aside from within and a little, bent old man, as wrinkled as a walnut and as brown, with long, bare arms covered with muscles, came out. He blinked at the explorers in the sunlight.”

And indeed only a modest distance from our circular stone base, but at a somewhat higher level, lies the still identifiably levelled ground of a pitstead where a charcoal pile may well once have been tended by the



Charcoal burners

men whose hut lay below. A strategic placing not only high above, but in a position which ensured that smoke was generally carried well away by the prevailing south-westerlies.

Stone remains are notoriously difficult to date, but in this case they are in a particularly tumble-down condition, seemingly indicative of a structure of considerable antiquity. Nevertheless, with a bit of imagination, it's possible to make out what was probably once a hearth constructed as an integral part of the circular structure, and on the opposite side, a gap in the stones where a doorway, as described by Ransome, was to be found. A hearth, in a glade some distance away, no longer shows any evidence of an associated hut base, and was presumably a stand-alone structure related to a more temporary abode.

So, with extensive coppicing, trackways, pitsteads, the circular stone remnants of a hut and a hearth of particular note, all adjacent to Hill Top - indeed, all now within Hill Top's grounds – this then begs the question: was Ransome aware of any of this?

Of course, Backhouse Brow was not owned by Ransome and there is no indication in his diaries that he ever wandered in – not altogether unsurprising, given the uncompromisingly steep and rugged nature of the hillside and Arthur's increasingly poor health. However, I'm sure that's unlikely to have stopped a slightly younger and fitter Arthur venturing forth if he so wished. After all, in his diary entry for Tuesday 7 May 1957 he wrote:

“Walked from Rusland Road to well above Boretree Tarn. Was looking down on it, and then went on to come down the watershed on the far side, coming into the road just this side of Finsthwaite House and so along the road home at 6 p.m. No damage to surgery but I expect cramp tonight. (No cramp & very good night).”



Charcoal burners, 1926

The walk described via Boretree Tarn, high above Hill Top, is around three and a half miles in extent with a height gain of some 500 feet, so it was not exactly a simple stroll for a man with evident physical problems. However, it must be said that this stands in stark contrast to most of his many other entries in which he describes or bemoans his limited capabilities!

And if he felt unable to simply enter Backhouse Brow directly from Hill Top's grounds, he need only have walked down the road a short distance and entered through a large non-gated opening in the stone wall – or, indeed, any number of other places where the wall was (and still is) in disrepair.

Apart from the odd passing and inconsequential mention of the woodland, there is just a single entry on Sunday 1 May 1960 which

states: “Saunders [*a neighbour in Ealinghearth*] is burning coppice along our boundary.” And that's all there is of substance (if it deserves to be called such) relating to Backhouse Brow in Ransome's diaries between 1956 when he and Evgenia first rented Hill Top for the summer, and his final entry in February 1964. Just a single reference indicating the woodland's historic managed use, though not for its historic industry of charcoal making, merely some tree clearing.

So, whilst he was certainly aware of coppicing (after a fashion), he makes no other consequential mention of the woodland, let alone any archaeological connection with charcoal burners. Yet if he was aware of any of this, he would surely have taken an interest, particularly as Evgenia had, in 1956, found at Hill Top a “stone axe-hammer, broken through the perforation ... Axe end missing. Present weight 1 lb. 15 oz.” which is now in the collection at the Museum of Lakeland Life, Kendal. Though not on show, a photograph kindly provided by the museum leaves me more than a little surprised as to how the rather uninteresting looking piece of stone caught her attention in the first place, and why she thought it of significance. Unfortunately, the museum has no further information and disappointingly Ransome's diaries make no mention of this rather peculiar find.

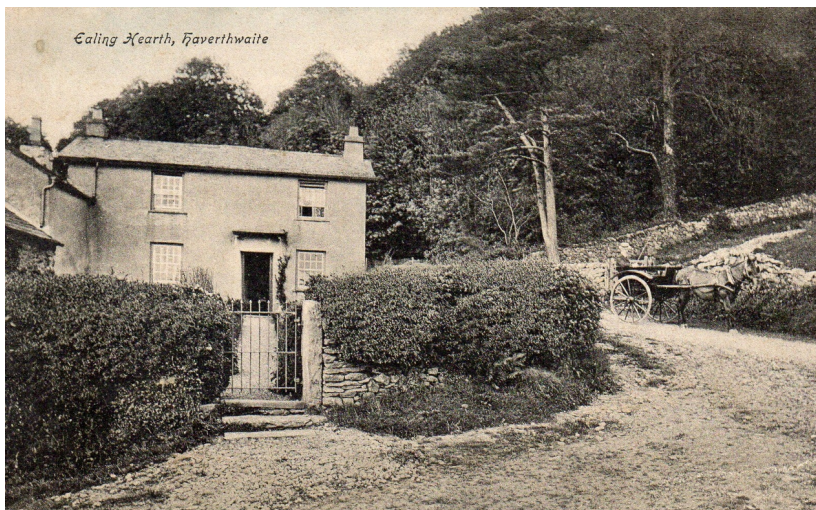
But what of *Ealinghearth*? What was the origin of the name? Not surprisingly, historic spellings vary and there are references to *Elinath* (1688), *Eleing Hearth* (1694), both *Elinarth* and *Ellinarth* (1698) and *Eelinharth* (1746). During the nineteenth century, and even well into the twentieth century, cartographers seem to have settled on *Elinghearth*. In fact, the Ordnance Survey were still showing *Elinghearth* on their maps until at least the late 1960s! Nevertheless, we have a postcard dated 1919 labelling the hamlet *Ealing Hearth*, though admittedly the card may be referring more specifically to the identically named cottage which stands in full view.

There is even a postcard dated 1905 which labels Ealinghearth with its current concatenated spelling. (They really did seem to produce postcard views of everything and anything in those good old days, no matter how minor the potential interest – thank goodness!)

Who knows what caused the name to finally evolve into *Ealinghearth* - or even when? But at least the Ordnance Survey have now caught up and presumably the fidelity of digitally recorded addresses will ensure it will forever remain so – or, at least, until the next human intervention.

So what does it mean? Whilst *hearth* clearly relates to some process involving heat, so *ealing* must relate somehow to the process itself, and indeed *ealing* may well derive from Old English *æling* meaning burning. Interestingly, there is also the similar word *elding* in Old Norse meaning fuel or firewood, and which remains a dialect word in both the north of England as well as Scotland.

In his 1895 book which considers similarities between Lakeland dialect words and their Icelandic or Old Norse counterparts, Thomas



Postcard c. 1919 - Ealing Hearth

Ellwood says: “Fire *elding*, as applied to chats and peats, is the most general name for fuel in Lakeland.” *Chats*, he tells us, refers to: “Fuel formed of underwood and brushwood, very commonly used in Lakeland for keeping up hearth fires and other household fires.” Though not directly linked, it seems entirely possible that there was a certain influence of one term upon the other in the north.

Now it has to be said that relevant contemporaneous references, in relation to whatever an ealinghearth was, are notable only for their paucity. And perhaps I should offer a word of caution for the reader keen on bagging typos: the spelling variants of *ealing* and even *hearth* become ever more fanciful from this point on!

In his much quoted work of 1908 entitled *The Early Iron Industry of Furness and District* (of present south Cumbria), Alfred Fell made the following references to ealinghearths in relation to the very extensive Graythwaite Estate , just a few miles along the road to the north of Ealinghearth:



Postcard c. 1905 - Ealinghearth

- A licence granted in 1544 “to make a little house and hearth called the Ealing hearth upon a convenient place in the tenement in Graythwayte ... & to use such broken wood & sticks there ...”
- A further licence granted in 1546 “to make two little houses and hearths called Ealing-hearths on their tenements in Furnessfells ... & to take broken wood & sticks there & on all other men’s farm holds in Furnessfells ...”
- In a decree of Elizabeth I, these ealinghearths are further described as: “Two little houses called Easinge Harthes with the brusinge wood and the Ealinge Asshes there to be made ...”, *brusing* being a northern vernacular term for young twigs used mainly for firewood.

These accounts of the fuel all bear a remarkable similarity with Ellwood's *chats* and *elding*.

Thirty years later, a short but enlightening article was published by Henry Winram Dickinson (1870-1952) in the somewhat esoteric *Transactions of the Newcomen Society*, a learned body for which he had once served as president. Dickinson was born in nearby Ulverston, so with a clear local interest, he describes a group visit to Ealinghearth in 1938 which he entitles, appropriately, *Elinghearths*, and in which he says that in a woodland about a mile away (Copy Hagg) they were shown two similar looking pits “of an inverted truncated-cone shape excavated out of side-long ground on the hill-sides”. Both were dry-stone lined and showed evidence of having been in contact with fire. He mentions that local charcoal burner Herbert Barker of nearby Town End Farm (who led

the party to the site) was unable to throw any light on the purpose of the pits, adding that they had not been used within living memory and that other similar pits were to be found in neighbouring coppiced woodland. Dickinson says the group was of the view that the pits were for burning the twigs and small branches of the coppice wood (the latter used to make charcoal) “so as to obtain wood ashes whence potash lye could be lixiviated [*a process of extraction*] to make into soap with tallow, or for other uses. It was surmised that the place name, Elinghearth, was connected with these pits.”

In a subsequent letter from Alfred Fell, Dickinson says Fell expressed no doubt that these pits were elinghearts and that they were “used for making wood ashes for the purpose of soap-making when everybody made their own.” Furthermore, the ashes were used in the fulling mills (“an adjunct to every manor”), and that “as there is no fullers’ earth in the district, the necessity for such hearths is apparent.” In support of his statement Fell cites the following:

At a Court held at Colton (in Furness) [*c.1538*] Thomas Rawlinson of Haverthwaite was amerced [*punished with a fine*] for “cutting the woods without licence and using the art called elying of asshes.”

Interestingly, the Archaeological Data Service shows just a single structure in Copy Hagg and records it as a potash kiln. Two other potash kilns are also identified in Parrocks Wood, half a mile closer to Ealinghearth. Photographs exist of the latter, though all that's evident is a rather uninspiring depression in the ground.

Disappointingly, so far as Ealinghearth is concerned, that's about all there is. However, whilst there are no contemporaneous physical descriptions of an ealinghearth, let alone any definitive physical

remnants, in other parts of England there are various remains known by the similar name, “elling hearth”. These range from “a hole in the ground” to substantial stone remains, a fine example of which can be found near Muker in the Yorkshire Dales. So far as function is concerned, seemingly there are two distinct (though perhaps related) end products mentioned: potash and a fire-dried wood, almost a sub-form of charcoal, variously called kilnwood, chopwood, elyngwood (aha!) and even “white coal” because of its pale colour. It has also been suggested that the ash was simply a by-product of the preparation of the kilnwood.

There's one particularly useful account involving elyngwood at the other end of England. Regarding the historic iron works of the tiny Kentish hamlet of Tudeley, near Tonbridge, Kent, the Wealden Iron Research Group reports:

Essential to the iron making process in any period is the acquisition of the raw materials of fuel and ore. Wood was required in two forms; as charcoal for smelting, and as *elyngwood* for roasting the ore before smelting ... The medieval bloomery site which was excavated in Minepit Wood, Rotherfield [*a few miles away*], and which had been active at the same period, included a stone-lined hearth for *elyng*.

(By one of those bizarre quirks of fate, until acquiring Hill Top in 2012, my wife and I lived just three miles away from Tudeley! We would visit the little church there from time-to-time to see its breathtaking stained glass windows – all designed by Marc Chagall. But that's another story.)

Although not carbonised like charcoal, elyngwood is clearly a somewhat related product involved in early iron making. However, it must be said that whilst there is no historic mention of elyngwood (or

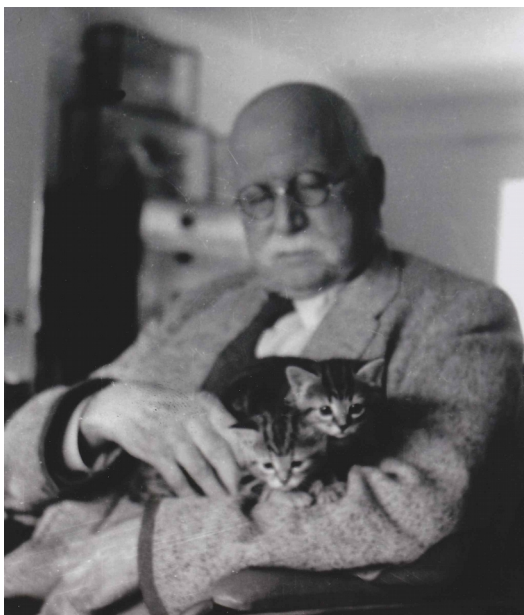
kilnwood etc.) in relation to any works near Ealinghearth or Graythwaite, there is likewise no mention of ashes in relation to the making of elyngwood in Kent. In contrast, a number of elling hearths in other parts of England bear the following description attributed to English Heritage: “Small stone hearth set up in a shallow pit. Burns vegetation and coppiced twigs to produce potash” with no mention of any elyngwood-like product. These differences may perhaps simply reflect the paucity of the historic record and later interpretations. Other sources claim that both ash and kilnwood were manufactured in the same hearth, though there seems to be no direct evidence.

Despite the lack of documentary explanation of the use to which the distinctly named “ealing ashes” were put, ealinghearths were evidently of sufficient importance to lend their name to a locality – or, more likely, Elinghearth Farm in the first instance. But if they were used solely in the making of ashes, then why were they distinguished from the similar product of potash kilns for which remains do exist in the area? Has it all become rather confused and conflated over time? However, somewhat surprisingly, Ealinghearth itself has no known remains identified specifically with “ealing” on its doorstep, where one might suppose. Are they simply awaiting discovery? Is there perhaps more of a connection with the stone remains in Backhouse Brow than is perhaps superficially evident?

Whilst somewhat short of charcoal burning, there was clearly a local activity involving the burning of wood, either to create ash *per se*, or perhaps (by comparison with the activities at Tudeley in Kent) to create elyngwood for nearby iron smelting and with a useful resultant ash by-product. Remaining more than a little enigmatic at this distance in time, the name *Ealinghearth* recalls at least a niche industry which once associated itself snugly with all that was going on locally.

Did Ransome have any idea? As with the archaeological remains in

Backhouse Brow, probably not. The origin of Ealinghearth's name is rather obscure and somewhat esoteric. Two later articles discussing ealinghearths and potash kilns locally, which appeared in the *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, titularly describe “A Little Known Late Medieval Industry”. Ransome had, in fact, been a member of the society since 1948, but these articles were not published until the 1970s, and Ransome had died in 1967, having been hospitalised in Cheadle near Manchester from 1965. Nevertheless, the idea of his wishing to rename Hill Top after this specialised local industry somewhat allied to charcoal burning is at least tantalising, even if, as seems likely, unwittingly coincidental.



*The last photograph of Arthur Ransome
taken in his study at Hill Top with his cats Tom and Dick,
Sunday 26 July 1964*