Tek Hod

Embroidered Wrestlers of the North

T&K HOD

Embroidered Wrestlers of the North

David Ellison

Crosby Ravensworth, 2011

Crosby Ravensworth, 2011

Lunesdale, 2011

Wasdale, 2011 (overleaf)

Wasdale, 2011

Wrestling with a Landscape

David Ellison

Tek Hod: Embroidered Wrestlers of the North is an embodiment of the landscape of Cumbria. The landscape is embroidered into the fabric of the people as if it were an emblem of its history. This book wrestles with the idea of documenting a landscape.

Once called into the ring, wrestlers shake hands and manoeuvre themselves to a grip. They face one another. Each opponent then places their chin on the shoulder of the wrestler and a grip is established by tightly clasping hands in order to lift their opponent. Imagine either two men or two women tightly hugging with chins on shoulders, arms locked around the mid back and legs bent like a crab! Once each wrestler has a fair grip, they tussle, grunt, pull and twist the opponent to the ground either by gently lowering them, if one wrestler is considerably stronger than the other, or in a fit of extreme force, if the match is equally balanced. The winner is judged from 'best of three' throws. This display is dance-like, poetic even. Like a dance, it has moves to master to become a champion: Back Heel, Outside Stroke, Inside Click, Hank, Buttock, Hipe, Back Heel and Cross Click.

Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling has clung to 'tradition' in its origins and practices. It usually takes place in an outside grassed arena bounded by a perimeter square or circle of around 15 metres, using the backhold style similar to other British and European styles with a wide range of 'chips' and throws practised by wrestlers. Competition is in several weight and age categories and all overseen by officials who employ time-honoured instructions in Cumbrian dialect.

The sport arguably started formally in the early to mid-18th century and has had several heydays i.e. the 1760s and 1770s, the 1830s to 1870s, the 1890s to roughly 1930, and the 1940s. Since the 1950s, though, it has been in a period of slow decline despite at-

Two wrestlers 'Tek Hod'
Mark Lowry (left) Alan Jones (right)
Silloth Victorian Festival, 20th June 1993

Harry Pickthall presents Christian Whitaker the under 15 champion trophy
Cleathor Moor Sports, Saturday 17th July 1993

tempts to present it as a retro, post-modernist historical tradition, at times mounted as a tourist attraction itself. Wrestling, along with other essentially Lake District sports and pastimes like fell running, hound trailing and climbing, have had to compete with the popular, mainstream and increasingly commercialised sports and pastimes of the modern age.

For over a century, Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling has interacted with other styles. Scottish Backhold wrestlers have come over the border to compete against Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestlers and there have been increasing reciprocal movements in the other direction, too. With more leisure time and cheaper transport since the 1950s, Cumberland and Westmorland wrestlers have competed against their Cornish Wrestling counterparts and, since 1985, when the Cumberland and Westmorland Association (CWWA) joined the International Federation of Celtic Wrestling (IFCW), they have competed wherever international championships have been held in countries like Spain, Sardinia, Brittany, Iceland and Ireland. Whilst these links have been forged to increase competition for wrestlers in an era of declining interest in the sport, they may also have some resonances in moves to reinvent regional tradition, particularly a Celtic tradition, an assumed long-lost heritage.

Another 'tradition' has been the costume which has remained relatively constant since about 1862. Previously, the costume amounted to a neat-fitting shirt, knee breeches and stockings but this standard was superseded by a certain athletic fashion for the age which was white tights and vest and an ornate, decorated centrepiece. Today, the governing body of the sport, the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association, insists on the costume rule of:

1. A PAIR OF SOCKS
2. LEGGINGS WHICH FIT TIGHTLY TO THE LEG (such as long-johns or tights)
3. A CENTREPIECE ELASTICATED ROUND THE WAIST AND LEGS
   In the absence of a purpose-made garment, a bathing costume is acceptable. Please note that shorts are not acceptable as a substitute.
4. A SINGLET VEST OR TEE-SHIRT
   The strip can be of any colour, and of any suitable material. Torn and muddy strips are unacceptable, unless the damage has occurred on the same day.'

Decoration of the 'new, fashionable, athletic costume' in the 1860s was widely recognised as having been instigated by the wrestler who then dominated the sport, George Steadman*. (*NOTE Image taken from GETTY see fig 14) Increasingly, his embroidered costume and those of others featured an adornment style typical of the mid to late Victorian period, in part, later influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement. Its local adherents like

Marion Twelves of the Langdale Linen Industry and Keswick School of Industrial Art and Annie Garnett at The Spinnery, Bowness-on-Windermere in their cottage industries, encouraged by John Ruskin's exhortation to return to the handmade, acted as standard bearers for the wrestlers' wives, mothers and girlfriends to copy.

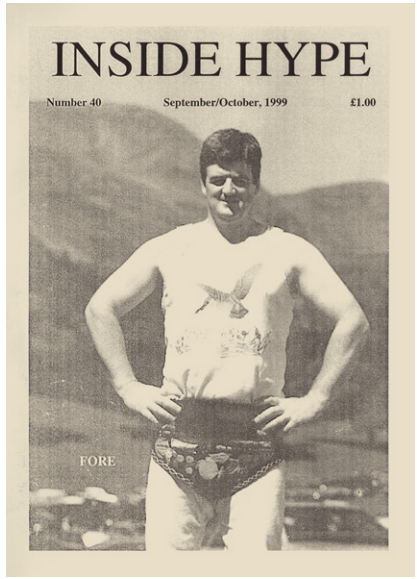
The predisposition towards nature and the rural environment in the designs on wrestlers' costumes is significant. It can be directly related to the various rural backgrounds of most of the wrestlers throughout wrestling history. It has become a central, celebratory element.

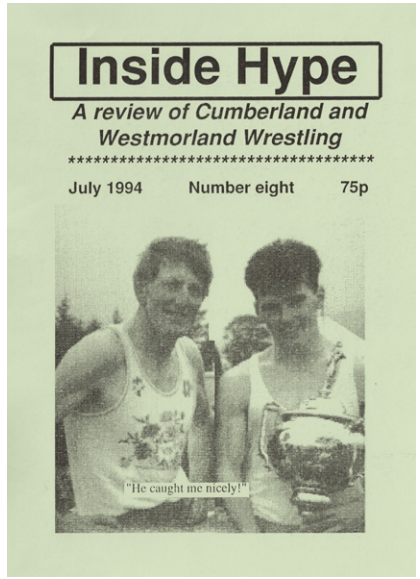
Witnessing the spectacle of outdoor wrestling whilst stood on post-industrial land - as wrestlers wear, what is essentially Victorian costume - the display of tradition is vividly disrupted. Conversely, this spectacle, when witnessed in a picturesque setting (most commonly in the Lake District), its unique vernacular fashion befits the occasion, becoming the visualisation of an invented tradition. This is seen in costumes that were worn by long-established wrestlers, then passed down to younger children and grandchildren to continue the embodiment of tradition.

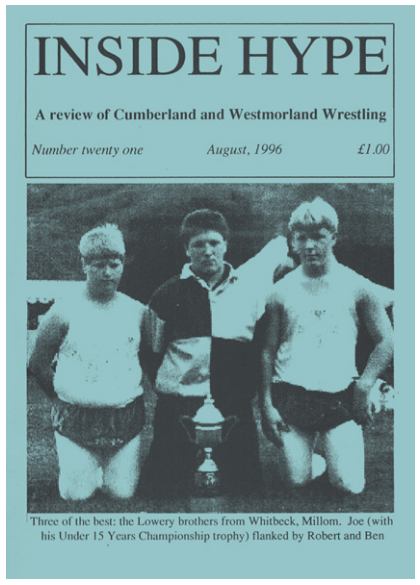
Today, some embroidered costumes, mainly worn by teenage wrestlers, seem to relate more to contemporary urban culture than rural design. The displacement of the sport from an essentially rural sport to a sub urban sport is a consequence of this change in design. This difference in style between the age groups represents an intriguing contrast.

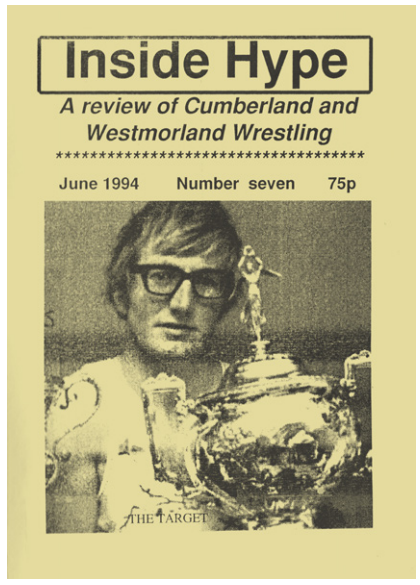
In and around the UNESCO World Heritage site of the Lake District, wrestlers involved in the 'performance of tradition', wearing intricately embroidered costumes which depict symbols of pre-industry couched in dichotomy and paradox are both a spectacle and the focus of this book. The book visualises a rhetorical relocation that romantically reframes the regional landscape.

Rab Clark and William Prudham
10.5st World Championship winner. Sunday 7th May 1995, Allerdean.

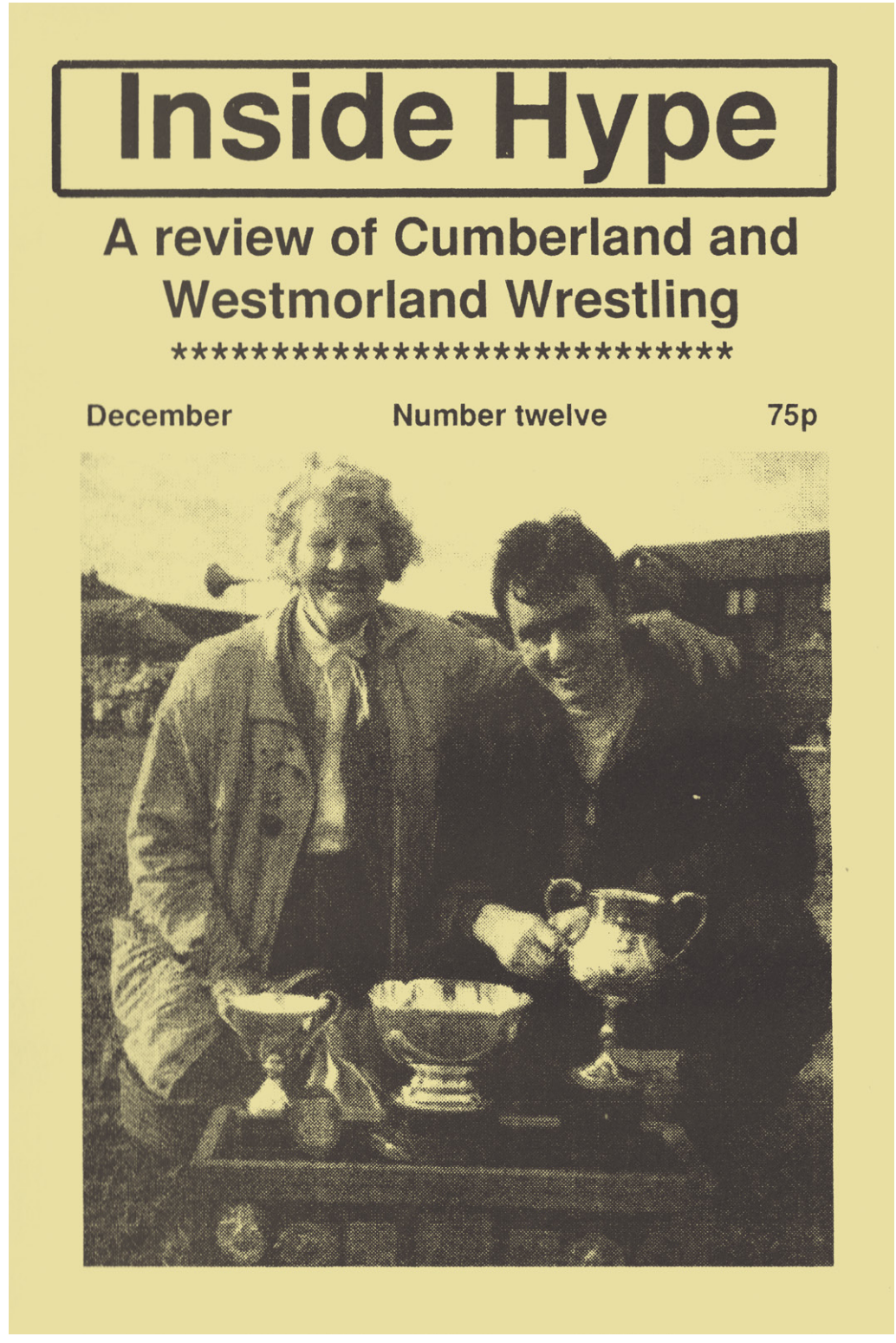








Inside Hype fanzine
Published by Roger Robson, 1990s



Capturing Customs

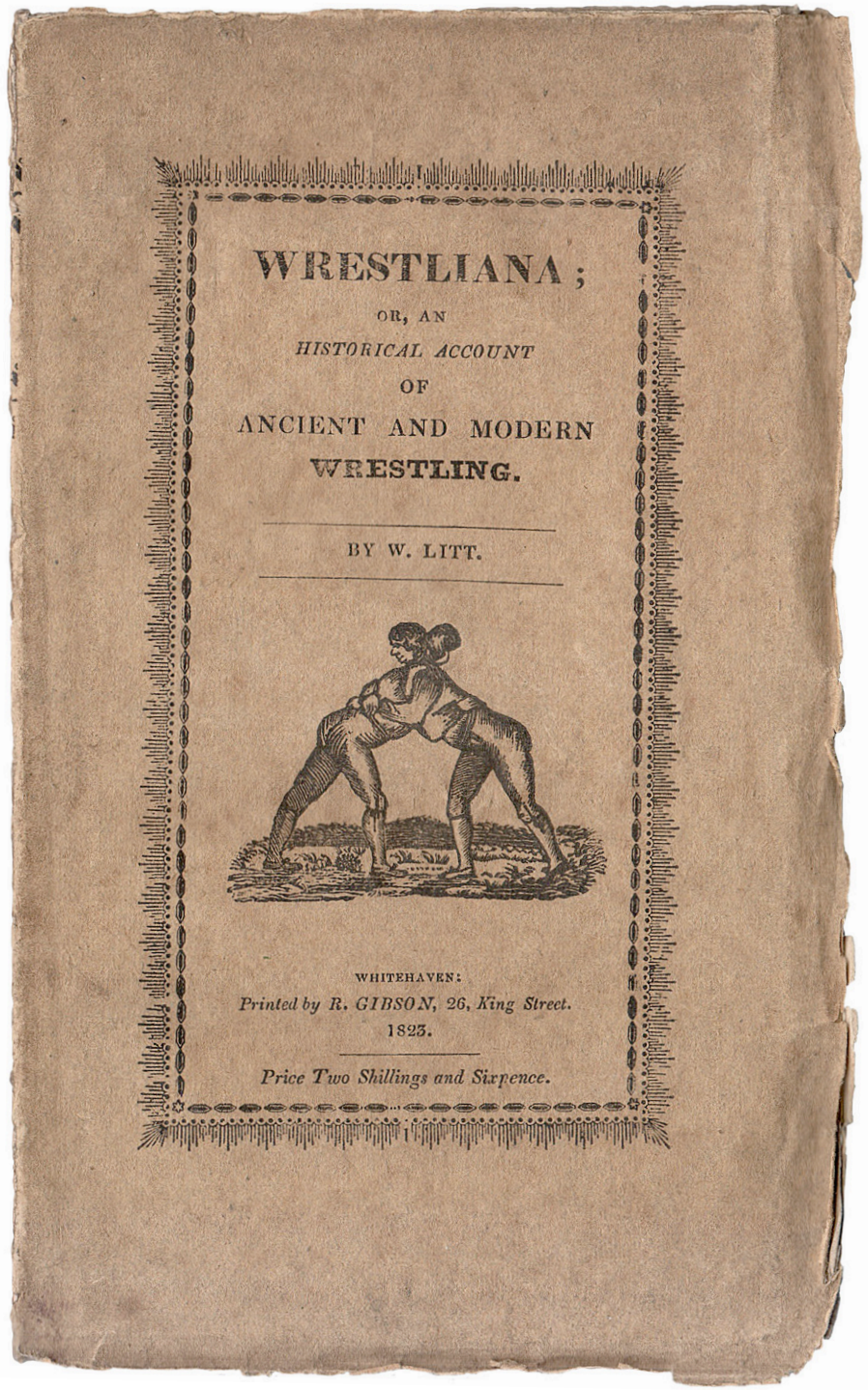
Lou Stoppard

David Ellison's Tek Hod series is about many things – sport, community, ritual, industrialisation, rural magnificence, heritage, style. It is about masculinity, violence, kinship; relevant themes to today. And, of course, it is about customs – those delicate, loaded things. A custom is a hard thing to photograph, partly because of its slippery nature. The codes and subtitles that are significant to a few are often unreadable to many. The meanings can so easily be lost – or appear as little more than whimsy, or even something kitsch, an easy joke.

As much as customs are hard to capture, they are also hard to protect without resorting to nostalgia or close-mindedness. How does a custom enrich itself, and find a new relevance as years go by? How does it avoid a strict and unproductive defence of the past? How does it retain beauty, joy, a sense of community, as the world moves forward and our ideas of excellence and our standards – our sense of what constitutes winning – morph? Many customs become relics, pressed onto others; an heirloom set up on a mantelpiece, never to be moved, a gravestone of past glory.

Some customs evolve to have a different kind of impact – any reverence to the past is loaded, in a productive way, as a comment on the future; a statement on change, and what could be possible, rather than a blockade against it. Some customs retain a fizzy sense of purpose, a sense, for those who take part, of being involved in something bigger than you, something that accespts you while also demanding more of you. One comes to see such customs, and one's fellow devotees, as being bound by the freemasonry of difference, held as one by the belief in some vague notion of an alternative, of going against the crowd.

A custom can be a tradition, or it can be a kind of protest.



Wrestliana
William Litt, 1823

Ellison's images consider both aspects. Of course, the images are about time, too – and about the way the passage of it both erodes and galvanises. As William Litt, the champion wrestler turned writer and poet, wrote in Wrestliana (1823), when reflecting on the popularity of "back-hold wrestling" in 1778; "Since those days of our fathers, great indeed is the change effected in the habits, customs and manners, of all classes of people throughout England; and in no part of it more than in the north. The festivities of Christmas, the hilarities of sheep-shearing, and other seasons of mirth and jollity, are now but the mere shadow of what they were, even at the short distance of time we treat of. Though some dainties, neither much known nor wanted in those days, are now in common use, yet home-brewed, that soul and cementer of good fellowship, so often spoken of in raptures by aged, has nearly disappeared. At that time, if money was more scarce, ale was better and cheaper; and pastimes were not only frequent, but enjoyed with much less care for to-morrow."

Tom Harrington 11.5 stone champion
Ambleside, 1993

Indeed, Ellison's Tek Hod images are as much about societal memories (or the fantasies of those memories) and dreams, as they are pastimes. The punch of each picture – the pathos, the beauty, and, of course, the delicious yet respectful wit – comes in the contrast that underpins what we see. The divide between something "basic, primitive", as wresting is described in Roger Robson's 1999 documentary history of Cumberland and Westmorland wresting, and something so committed to finesse, to performance, to posturing, to flamboyance, to fashion.

Robson dates Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling back centuries. Many have suggested that the Vikings brought their wrestling style to the Cumbrian coast during their colonisation, but there is "no way of knowing," he writes. Some, buoyed by early Irish carvings depicting wrestling, theorise that Irish captive slaves introduced the sport to Iceland, teaching young Vikings, who then in turn brought it to Cumbria on their invasion. Yet, "wouldn't it have been easier for the Irish to have paddled over here direct?" asks Robson.

His history cites an educational treatise from 1581, which advocates wrestling as part of the curriculum. "The vehement vpright wrestling chafeth the outward partes of the bodie most, it warmeth, strengthneth and encreaseth the fleshe though it thinne and drie withall. It takes away fatness, puffes, and swellings: it makes the breath firme and strong, the bodie sound and brawnie, it tightes the sinews and backs all the natural operations." But, the sport is about more than fitness. It looks beyond the body, to the mind, and to one's community and surroundings – to the beauty of the green space, to the backdrop of castles, rivers, fells and dales. These are the principals on which ever match is fought. Yes, there are the rules – the particulars of the 'tekkin hod' grip, after which Ellison's series is named; the necessarily fancy footwork; the 'dog-fall', which occurs when the judges are unable to declare a winner (the match simply starts again) – but there are also the ideals, which froth into identities; the commitment to place, to craft, to skill.

John Reay
Grasmere, 1993

Pat Mallow
Ambleside, 1993

It is easier to date the fashions of wrestling, than it is to date wrestling itself. The intricately embroidered costumes we see throughout Ellison's images, and in the other material included in his book, gained popularity after 1860. Since then, the looks have changed only slightly. "Suspenders came and went," writes Robson. "Grandad vests changed to singlets, for a time flat caps were worn in the ring, neat swimming trunks are still an acceptable alternative to the velvet centrepiece, shorts, particularly Bermuda shorts, were banned recently as a variation of the centrepiece." Today's rules for the "strip" require a pair of socks, tight-fitting leggings, whether long johns or tights, a vest or t-shirt, and a centrepiece, which should be elasticated around the waist and legs. If one is without a purpose-built garment, a bathing suit will suffice, though shorts will not. "Torn and muddy strips are unacceptable, unless the damage has occurred on the same day," the rules state.

It would be easy to dismiss such regulations, and the costumes they dictate, as the amusing product of folklore or the frivolities encouraged by regional habits. But, as Ellison's images highlight, the costumes are not merely picturesque and wholesome, even if they are lovely (some, unsurprisingly, take hours to finish). Ellison

points to the way the motifs, details, and the craft itself, celebrate "a pre-industrial world of the countryside and rural traditions." They, are, he says, perhaps an example of an "invented tradition", a term made prominent in 1983 by the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger; in other words, they owe nothing to a genuine 'ancient tradition', but instead reflect contemporary conditions and a reaction to industrialisation, to change, and to the march of modernity. The costumes have links, Ellison argues, to the principals and aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts movement – to the questioning of the waste, the pace, the pollution, the puffery of wares. In wrestling, the strip is at the heart of the whole performance - not just the performance of the sport, but also that of the identities wrapped up in it. The strip is a protest, of sorts. And of course, there is a fine line, if any line at all, between protest and performance.

Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling is a struggle; both its simplest form, and in its most abstract. It is the struggle to maintain an advantage, to keep grasp on what we hold dear. It is a struggle against threats – to one's position, to one's community, to the beautiful green, to the rural landscape. It is a struggle also, perhaps, against the decline of a particular masculine ideal. And, of course, it is a struggle against one's own decline as one's body tires, and the sweat makes one's hands slip, and one's opponent manipulates his chance. The struggle is cyclical – the threatening forces warp, mould and renew. If the judges cannot declare a winner, one starts again. If searching for symbolism, what better emblem is there for a custom, for a regional identity, for belonging, than that cyclical struggle? Than that rhythm. Than that attempt to hold tight - looking back in order to make sense of what comes next.

Hethersgill Vintage Rally, 2012

Powburn, 2011

Crosby Ravensworth, 2011

Crosby Ravensworth, 2011

Patterdale, 2012

Kirkheaton, 2011

Hethersgill Vintage Rally, 2012

Egremont Crab Fair, 2011

Hethersgill Vintage Rally, 2012

Patterdale, 2012

Crosby Ravensworth, 2011

Penrith, 2011


A.C.C. Juniors
FINE COUNTRY
University of Cumbria
MATTHEWS BENJAMIN
Carter Jonas
FUDGE

Ambleside Sports, 2016 (overleaf)

Dalston, 2011

Grasmere Sports 2016.
A spectator, Alan Wills looks on as Grasmere Sports, the UK's largest gathering of rural sport takes place in the valley below.

Dalston, 2011 (above)

Westmorland Show, 2012 (overleaf)

David Lee (left), Ken Dodd (centre), and an unkown wrestler (right)
Date, place

Grasmere Sports, 1964

Grasmere Sports, 1965

Thomas Longmire
Troutbeck, 1970-1879

Jim Scott
1970-1879

Grasmere, date unknown

Billy Bragg (left), Tommy Little (right)
Date Unknown, Place Unknown

Can we get high res?

Bill Strickland
Date Unknown, Place Unknown

Can we get high res?

Peter Hunter
14 stone World Championship
Wansbeck, 1964

Can we get high res?

Newspaper clipping
Wrestlers unknown

Can we get high res?

Ambleside Sports 1975
10.5 stone Championship
Wrestlers unknown

Can we get high res?

Bernard Molloy
Grasmere, 1973

Unknown wrestlers
Photograph by Joseph Hardman

From left; Andy Telford, B.Horn, JS Williams and RI Graham
Grasmere, date

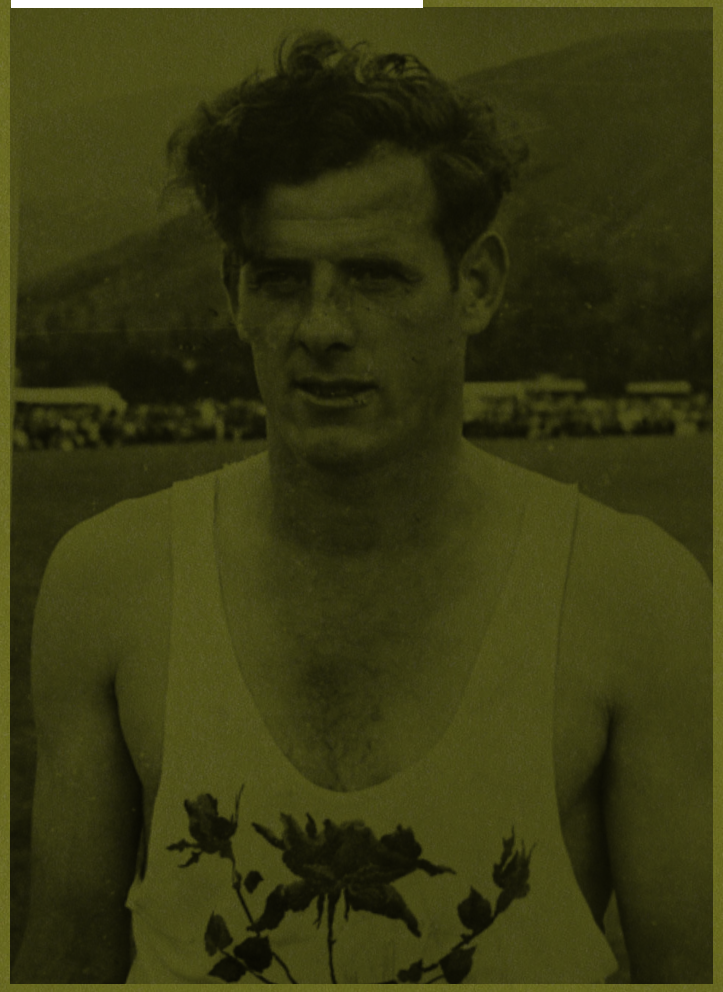
Can we get high res?

Wrestler unknown

Can we get high res?

Bernard Coward (Left)
Raymond Wharton (Right)
Mungrisedale
1964

Can we get high res?



Geoff Wilson
August 1964, place unknown

Can we get high res?

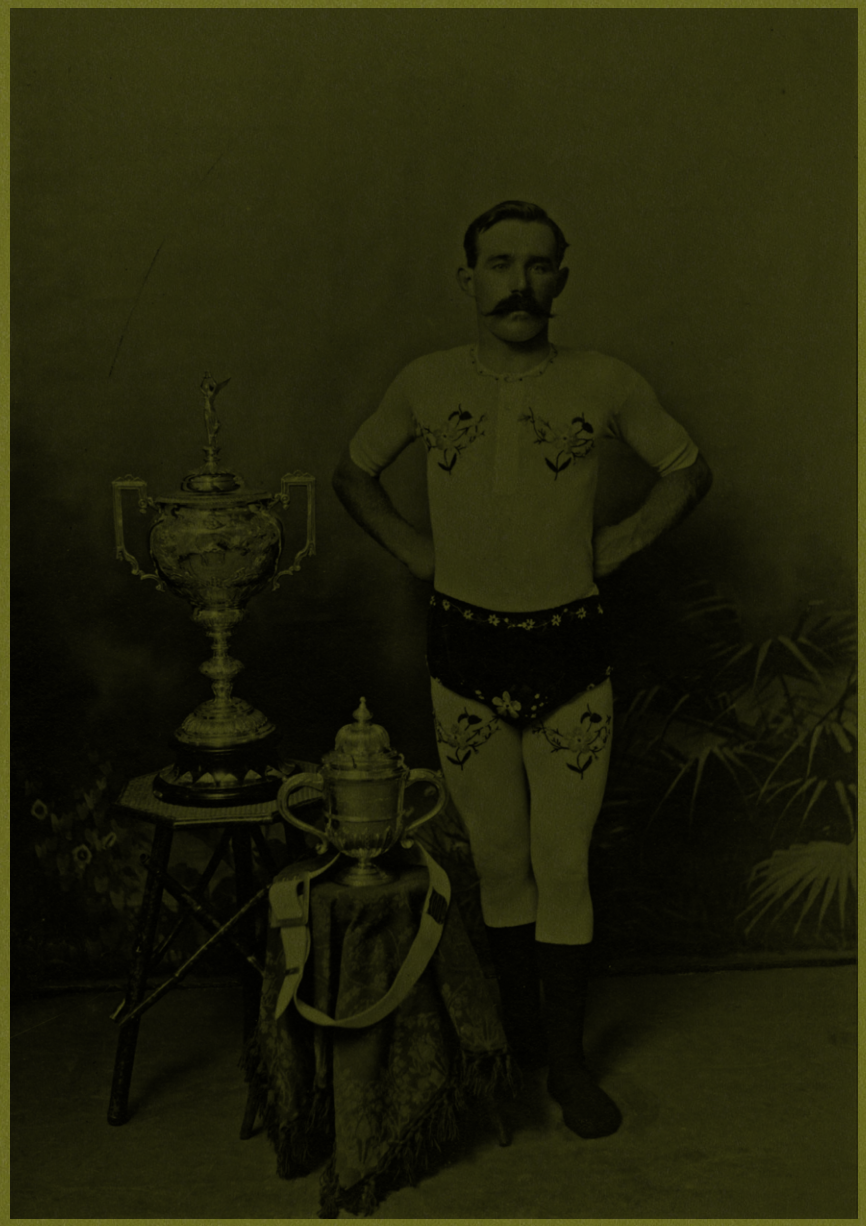
Pooley Bridge Sports
12th June 1965

Two unknown wrestlers
1920 to 1929

Wrestling event
Carlisle, 1910 to 1919

Ralph Steadman and Hexham Clarke,
1900 - 1909

Left to right; Stead St Studho?, Gates? Hexham Clarke and Strong (NEED TO REVISE THIS CAPTION)
Date, Place



1900- 1900

1900- 1900

1890 to 1899

Right:
1900 to 1909

Hexham Clarke,
1890 to 1899

Lord Lonsdale presenting prize to heavyweight wrestler George Bowman,
Grasmere Sports 1906

Children wrestling
Date unknown

Carl Clark
Grasmere
2008

Ellie Wilson
2012

Red Rose Vest for James

Tom Harrington Vest

Jack Brown
Ambleside, 2012

Richard Dixon
Ambleside 2010 (overleaf)

Ben Brocklebank
Ings, 2008

Ben Brocklebank
Ambleside, 2012

Richard Dixon Vest

Gemma Coulthard Vest

Overleaf:
Richard Dixon
Ambleside, 2010

Right:
Harold Wilson
Ambleside, 2012

Abi Marston Vest (front)

Abi Marston Vest (back)

Vikki Beaty
Ambleside, 2016

High res needed

Matthew Atkinson
place, *2010*

Joe Thompson
Grasmere, 2010

Andrew Farmer Mason
Waberthwaite, 2011

Abi Marston Vest (front)

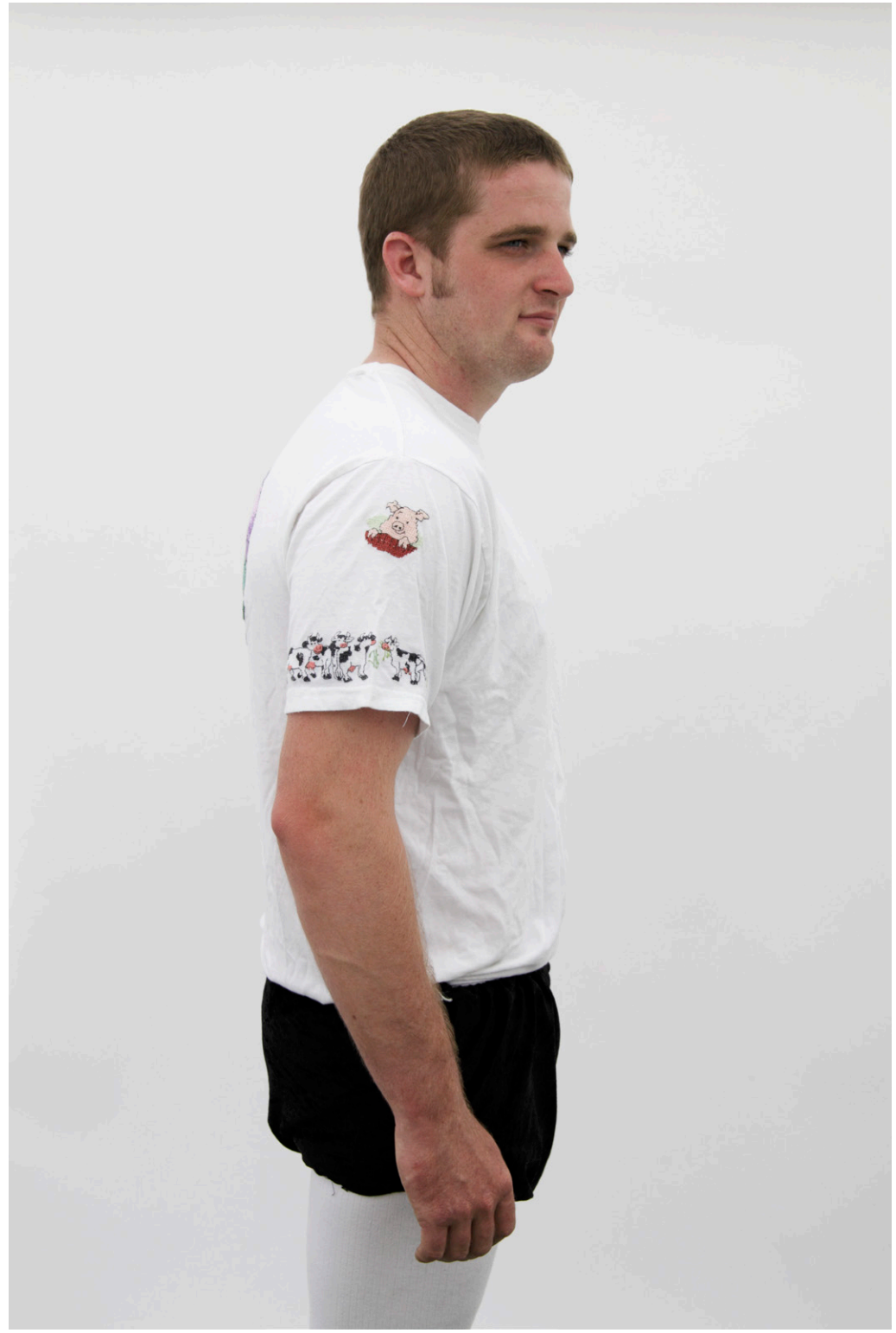
Abi Marston Vest (back)

Paul Murray
Grasmere, 2011

Megan Gibson
Ambleside, 2010

Abigail Marston
Ambleside, 2010

Graham Brocklebank
Ambleside, 2012



Richard Dixon Centrepiece

Abi Marston Centrepiece

Ellie Wilson
Ambleside, 2012


WILSON
KENDAL ACADEMY


WRESTLING

Abigail Marston Centrepiece

Gemma Coulthard Centrepiece

Overview:
Jamie Wilson
Ambleside, 2012

Right:
George Wilson
Ambleside, 2012

George Wilson
Ambleside, 2016

John Harrington
Ambleside, 2012

Graham Brocklebank
Ambleside, 2012

Richard Fox
Ambleside, 2016

Matty Hodgson
Grasmere, 2016

Abigail Marston
Grasmere, 2016

David Ellison b. Macclesfield.

Growing up in Cheshire and Cumbria, David began his photography career as an assistant to Brian Griffin and Craig McDean. Now a Senior Lecturer at predigious Arts University Bournemouth, he holds a PhD from Ulster University and a BA Hons in Photography from Lancaster University. David has previously taught at Ulster University and Falmouth University and is currently a Level 4 Tutor at AUB. His research into embroidered wrestling costumes of the North of England has featured as part of touring exhibitions at Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool and Somerset House, London in 2017 as well as The Civic, Barnsley in 2019. His photographs have been published into two photo-books - Herdwick Common (2014) and Tek Hod: Embroidered Wrestlers of the North (2020). David's work is held at the Archive of Modern Conflict (London), the Library of Birmingham and Tullie House Collections (Carlisle). His work has been exhibited across the UK and Europe and he has photographed for leading, quality newspapers and magazines in England and France.

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Dedicated to Oisín Greaney-Ellison.

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C.W. WRESTLING